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OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2023

Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

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and North Central Indiana
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*Manufacturers turn to experts for advice on
finding, financing, implementing new technology*

*Mitch Landess
Vice president
Innovation and
Digital transformation
Conexus Indiana*



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Manufacturers turn to experts for advice on finding, financing, implementing new technology



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GOOD BIT

37,764

The number of Illinois residents who moved to Indiana in 2021, according to a U.S. Census Bureau report.

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IN THIS ISSUE

The golden rule — treat others as you would like to be treated — is more than just a guideline, it's a way of life. The people and organizations featured in our October-November issue know that, and share their work ethic and goodwill with co-workers and neighbors.

In our cover story, business owners used Manufacturing Readiness Grants to buy technology that will make workers' jobs easier and give them chances to upskill.

Managers are especially aware of their employees' mental health as the state shines a spotlight on inequities in access and care. Programs like on-site nursing and expanded Employee Assistance Programs offer easier ways to be well.

We explore tax credits with experts who point out ways to save by embracing energy-efficient standards at home and in the office.

While some of those changes aren't so easy, town officials and investors are busy reconstructing downtowns across the Region in anticipation of the double-track's project completion next year. They also keep residents in mind as they consider ways to make getting around easier for walkers, riders and motorists.

Hammond is one of those towns that is pretty much under construction. In our ongoing series, "The Future of," we highlight the projects that will change the face of the city forever and efforts to increase its population to 90,000 by 2030.

With an influx of residents, a more diverse population will call for understanding and common ground in the Region. In our third and last special section of the year, we define DEI and ask experts what it means for employers and the people they count on to make their businesses successful.

Chocolate and dinosaurs might not seem to fit in with my theme, but entrepreneur Mark Turner found kindness in his community when he thought his dream museum might not come true.

For those readers taking the advice of our wellness story, Evexia Salt Cave offers a unique opportunity to unwind. And then, if love is what you need, Humane Indiana is looking for foster parents and volunteers.

Finally, Neil Samahon of Opportunity Enterprises reminds us that the golden rule should be applied to everyone — no matter their abilities. Enjoy this issue!

— Heather Pfundstein, managing editor

PICTURE PERFECT



Humane Indiana provided us with so many cute photos of the pets they rescue and help that we just had to share a few more with our readers.

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Photos provided by Humane Indiana

Professional advancement



SCAN WITH YOUR PHONE

Businesses, organizations share latest news about new hires, promotions, accolades

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN

Accounting

Adam Lange joined Michigan City-based **CLH, CPAs & Consultants** as a staff accountant, and **Jessica Mitchell** joined as an associate. Both are also QuickBooks ProAdvisors.

Architecture

Alliance Architects in South Bend promoted seven senior staff members to the new position of associate principal: registered architects **Mark Burrell**, **Patrick Hess**, **Rick Podrasky**, **Kevin McShane** and **Joe Nucciarone**; and licensed professional engineer **Brad White**; and architectural technician **Pat Leavell**.

Tom Schmaltz celebrated 50 years at Benton Harbor, Michigan-based **Wightman**. He started in the survey department on July 16, 1973, and has worked his way up to a construction services specialist in the engineering department.

Mishawaka-based **Arkos Design** hired **Marie-Noelle Neidemire** as an NCIDQ certified interior designer.

Banking

Michael Schrage, chief executive officer and chairman of the board of

Centier Bank, was honored by the **Indiana Bankers Association** at its annual Leaders in Banking Excellence Awards ceremony in August. **Artavia Franklin** was hired as a community lender in Merrillville-based Centier Bank's South Bend west branch. **Tanya Leetz** was hired as director of deposit operations. **Clay Koehler** was promoted to vice president of business banking at the bank's Lafayette business, mortgage and investment center. **Valerie Anderson** was hired as a mortgage loan officer in the Valparaiso east branch. **Katie Withey** was promoted to branch manager of the bank's Plymouth branch.

Billinero, an app-based savings account that awards cash prizes in monthly and quarterly drawings to select users, named Adam Minsky of St. John and Jack Weber of Crown Point as the quarterly and monthly drawing winners.

Economic development

Eric Beschinski is the new business adviser/ecosystem navigator at the **NWI Small Business Development Center**.

Leaders from the **Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission** were elected to national board positions at the **National Association of Regional Councils'**

57th annual conference in Detroit. **Justin Kiel**, County Council member of La Porte County and NIRPC's immediate past chair, was elected to serve as senior vice president of NARC's board of directors. NIRPC's Executive Director **Ty Warner** succeeded Stanislaus Council of Governments (California) Executive Director Rosa De León Park as chairman of the NARC executive directors council. **Geof Benson**, of the Beverly Shores Town Council, was awarded the NARC's President's Award.

Portage native **Karaline Cartagena Edwards** is the economic development manager for the **Economic Development Corp. Michigan City**.

The **Michigan City Chamber of Commerce** announced **Jessica O'Brien** as the Ambassador of the Quarter for the second quarter of 2023.

Vanessa Green Sindors, a former Fortune 100 executive and veteran policy strategist, was selected the Indiana Chamber's incoming president and CEO.

Education

Doug Tougaw, **Valparaiso University's** dean of the College of Engineering, is the new president of the **American Society for Engineering Education**.



ACCOUNTING
Adam Lange



ARCHITECTURE
Tom Schmaltz



ARCHITECTURE
Marie-Noelle Neidemire



BANKING
Artavia Franklin



BANKING
Tanya Leetz

Ronald Metoyer, a professor of computer science and engineering and associate dean for diversity and faculty development in the **University of Notre Dame's** College of Engineering, has been appointed vice president and associate provost for teaching and learning.

Kory Vitangeli was named **Indiana University South Bend's** vice chancellor for student engagement. She was the dean of students and vice president for student and campus affairs at the University of Indianapolis.

Eloi Lantiegne is a new admissions counselor at **Indiana University Northwest**.

Dawn Combis, who teaches entrepreneurship classes for **Ivy Tech Community College**, was one of 19 instructors across the state selected to receive an Excellence in Dual Credit Instruction President's Awards. **Louie Gonzalez** retired as Ivy Tech Lake County's chancellor.

Kwangsoo Park was named associate dean and director of the White Lodging School of Hospitality and Tourism



BANKING
Valerie Anderson

Management in the College of Business at **Purdue University Northwest**.

Entrepreneurship

Kara Woolsey was named chief executive officer, and **Adam Brames** was promoted to chief operations officer of Indianapolis-based Mom Water. The company's alcoholic beverages are sold in the Region.

Government

Gov. Eric Holcomb named **Kenneth Wagner** of Osceloa to the **Fire Prevention & Building Safety Commission**. **David Rosenberg** was named the state's secretary of commerce. **Katie Nelson** was selected deputy director of the **Indiana State Department of Agriculture**. Holcomb appointed two residents from Valparaiso to the **Worker's Compensation Board**. **Sandra O'Brien** will serve on the part-time board until Aug. 31, 2027, and **James Sarkisian** will serve until Aug. 31, 2026.

Cora Steinmetz is the next director of **Indiana Medicaid**. She replaces **Allison Taylor** who resigned this



BANKING
Katie Withey



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Karaline Cartagena Edwards

summer after serving eight years with the **Indiana Family and Social Services Administration**.

Cheryl Lutey was named chief human resources officer for the **city of Valparaiso**.

Paul Labovitz retired as the park superintendent of **Indiana Dunes National Park**.

The state's Solicitor General **Thomas Fisher** joined **EdChoice**, a nonpartisan organization that helps families with educational choices.

Patrick Reardon resigned as **Merrillville's** town manager in July. Reardon worked in community development for the city of Hammond for 30 years before taking on the leadership role with Merrillville.

Health care

Survive & Thrive Counseling, 1457 E. 84th Place, in Merrillville, expanded its services by three new therapists. **La Tanya Jahan-Robbins**, **Versie McClay-Chatman** and **Rachael McConnell** join staff members **Monique Franklin** and **Leesa Harris**.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Vanessa Green Sindors



EDUCATION
Doug Tougaw



EDUCATION
Ronald Metoyer

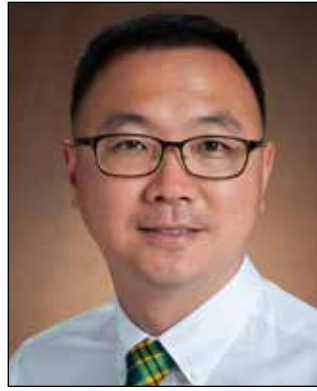


EDUCATION
Kory Vitangeli

AROUND THE REGION



EDUCATION
Dawn Combis



EDUCATION
Kwangsoo Park



GOVERNMENT
David Rosenberg



GOVERNMENT
Katie Nelson

Board-certified infectious disease and internal medicine **Dr. Annette Abraham** is serving patients at the **Franciscan Health** Medical Pavilion, 3500 Franciscan Way in Michigan City. Board-certified interventional cardiologist and cardiac electrophysiologist **Naseer Nasser** is part of the **Franciscan Physician Network** in Michigan City.

Community Healthcare System recently welcomed eight doctors to the

Community Care Network Inc.: electrophysiologist **Tarek Ajam**, general and bariatric surgeon **Yazen Assaf**, gastroenterologist **Hadi Atassi**, podiatrist **Ahmad Dabbouseh**, pediatrician **Sibil Gill**, infectious disease physician **Benjamin Goldenberg**, interventional cardiologist **Jonathan Meyer**, and family medicine physician **Jason Rothchild**.

Northwest Health – La Porte and Starke named its outstanding team

members of the quarter: Clinical Team Member of the Quarter at La Porte, **Jen Ulrich**, blood bank lead; Non-Clinical Team Member of the Quarter at La Porte, **Liebenette Grimm**, a human resource generalist; Team Member of the Quarter at Starke, **Kim Shell**, a pharmacy technician. Northwest Health welcomed cardiologists **Jessica Williams** and **Ajoe John Kattoor** to **Northwest Medical Group**. Nurse practitioners



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Melody Brucker



INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Lisette Martinez



INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Conlon Casey



INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Mike Hutter

Brittany Lynn and **Kayla Turner** joined **Northwest Medical Group – Primary Care** in La Porte. Northwest Health – Porter honored two caregivers in August: **Jennifer Carpenter** received the DAISY award for exceptional nursing, and **Wil Ortiz**, a security officer, received the PETALS award for outstanding support professionals. Northwest Health welcomed its first class of family medicine residents with a traditional white coat

ceremony. Members of the class of 2026 are:

- **Sarah Elassal**, M.D., Caribbean Medical University School of Medicine
- **Chukwuka Ikediashi**, M.D., Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University College of Medicine
- **Andrea Origenes**, D.O., Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine of Midwestern University
- **Jessica Swearingen**, D.O., Des

Moines University College of Osteopathic Medicine

- **Laura Vives**, M.D., the University of Guadalajara, Guadalajara Medical School
- **Yangyang Wang**, M.D., Shandong University School of Medicine

Information technology

Melody Brucker was named vice president of operations and **Lisette**



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AROUND THE REGION



INSURANCE
Matt Workman



LOGISTICS
Jenna Richardt



MANUFACTURING
Tina Christiansen



NONPROFIT
Richard Watson

Martinez was named vice president of sales and marketing for **Comcast's** greater Chicago region, which includes Illinois, Northern Indiana and Southwest Michigan. Martinez serves as co-lead for Comcast's regional diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging council.

Conlon Casey was named managed service information technology sales engineer for Merrillville-based **Pulse Technology**.

Mike Hutter was promoted to director of channel and carrier sales at Elkhart-based **Surf Internet**.

Insurance

Matt Workman joined the Valparaiso office of Chicago-based **Proper Title** as an account executive.

Logistics

Jenna Richardt is the new senior vice president of business development and engagement at the **Ports of Indiana**. She was the chief regional economic development officer and senior vice president for the Evansville Regional Economic Partnership.

Manufacturing

Pittsburgh-based **U.S. Steel Corp.** appointed **Emily Chieng** as its investor relations officer beginning in September.

Elkhart-based **LEER Group** appointed **Nando Zucchi** president and chief operating officer. The company manufactures truck caps, covers and accessories.

Tina Christiansen joined Merrillville-based **Haire Group**,

which is in the corrugated box machinery industry, as the client services manager.

Elkhart-based **Thor Industries** promoted **Ryan Juday** to president of KZ Recreational Vehicles and **Kyle Kwasny** to president of Heartland RV.

Elkhart-based **Fasnapp Corp.** promoted **Jeff Kendell** to president of the manufacturing company. He started 20 years ago as a salesman. **Joe Killingbeck** also was promoted to chief operating officer and **Dave Freshour** to director of operations.

Nonprofit

La Porte County Symphony Orchestra Principal Tuba Musician **Richard Watson** had a chair named in his honor by an anonymous donor. Watson has been with the LCSO for 31 years.

Lisa Schneider was promoted to chief medical director at Munster-based **Humane Indiana**.

The Legacy Foundation announced five new members to serve on its 2023-2024 board of directors: **Alfredo Estrada**, **Lisa Goodnight**, **Pam Ott**, **Chelsea Whittington** and **Sherri Ziller**.

Small Business

Lewellen Blooms received a \$10,000 prize and a one-year **Starke County Chamber of Commerce** membership in the fourth annual **2023 Starke Tank Countywide Small Business Pitch Competition**. Runner-up **Papa Farm Pizza** in downtown Knoxville won a \$5,000 prize.

The **Duneland Chamber of Commerce** announced new members:

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2023 Best of Michiana Business

Acme Printing in Crown Point; **Frankie's Bangers** in Chesterton; **Glacial Sands Oral, Facial, Implant Surgery** in Chesterton; **Goosehead Insurance — Zach Coulter Agency** in Chesterton; **Not So Costly Heating & Air Conditioning** of Porter County; **Pop Warner** of Chesterton; and **South Shore Public Relations** in Northwest Indiana.

News

Kansas-based family-owned **Rally House**, which sells sports apparel, gifts and home decor from professional and college sports teams, will open a location at the Southlake Mall in Merrillville in fall.

South Bend-based **Gibson**, an employee-owned insurance company, acquired **Brisk Advisors** in Utah.

Northwest Medical Group opened a new \$8.3 million physicians office at 2505 Calumet Ave. in Valparaiso.

Macy's opened a new small-format store Aug. 19 at 10429 Indianapolis Blvd. in Highland.

Michigan City-based **Hitachi Global Air Power US LLC** acquired **Henry Production Inc.**, parent company of **Pumps and Service**.

Wisconsin-based **Gorman & Company** renovated the historic **Carolyn Mosby Senior Living Community** in Gary.

Jet's Pizza will join McAlister's Deli, Sport Clips and others to round out the **Shoppes on the Boulevard** in Schererville.

SOLV Holdings LLC acquired Elkhart-based **Maverick Packaging Inc.** in a deal that is expected to pair the company with **Bomag Group** in Angola, Indiana.

South Bend-based **TCU Insurance** merged with **INGUARD**, a national insurance and risk management agency. ■

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FACTORY

MANUFACTURERS TURN TO EXPERTS FOR ADVICE ON FINDING, FINANCING, IMPLEMENTING NEW TECHNOLOGY



Konrady Plastics used a \$45,000 award in 2020 from the Readiness Grants program to buy a cobot to perform repetitive tasks that are often boring to humans.

Provided by Cobot Konrady Plastics

CHAS REILLY

In manufacturing, success doesn't come by just addressing immediate needs. Business leaders should also keep an eye toward the future.

"Every year, it gets a little harder in manufacturing if you just keep trying to do the same thing over and over again," said Mitch Landess, the vice president of innovation and digital transformation at Conexis Indiana.

Manufacturers looking to grow are investing in technology to make headway in Industry 4.0. Many local companies turning toward automation, AI, cloud computing, cobots and other technologies are finding those investments

are helping them generate more revenue, among many other benefits.

"The companies that tend to invest in themselves by leveraging technology to become more productive, more competitive, they make better use of their workforce," Landess said. "They're able to upscale the workforce; they're able to pay the workforce better because the workforce is doing higher value-added function in the workflow."

Mont Handley, the entrepreneur in residence and associate director at Purdue University Northwest's Commercialization and Manufacturing Excellence Center, expects more companies will move toward robotics and

automation. He noted the new White Castle in Whiting uses a robotic fry cooker.

"I think we're going to see a lot more of that in small businesses," Handley said.

For example

Tim Keller, president of Tri-State Industries in Hammond, said his company has added different technology, including a laser cutting machine about a year ago.

"Done a couple things, looking into a couple more," Keller said.

Tri-State Industries provides a variety of services such as manufacturing, fabrication, robotic welding and automation services. Keller is pleased

OF THE FUTURE



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with the laser cutting technology his company has been using.

"It's one of those things that would've always been nice to have," Keller said.

He said many projects in which it's used don't always require laser precision, but the device has allowed Tri-State to eliminate downstream processes, mainly drilling.

"You could get two, sometimes three processes accomplished in one setting," Keller said.

He said it's always critical for small- and medium-sized manufacturers to consider the future and how to become more efficient to stay competitive.

"If we're not doing it, somebody else probably is," Keller said.

While technology can provide numerous benefits in manufacturing, one of the challenges some companies face is finding affordable options.

"For us, it's always about balancing the need of the current time with something else you can do in the future to help cost justify these things because they're expensive for a company our size," Keller said.

Handley said prices have dropped for different automation and technology tools, making them more reasonable for small- and medium-sized businesses.

"It used to be an elite kind of tech that was only for Fortune 500 companies, but it is being democratized, and a lot of that work is being done at universities like ours," he said.

PNW is using manufacturing technology, robotics and cyber-physical systems for Project TRAVERSE, which sets out to develop agTech solutions such as remotely planting and harvesting crops.

"I think this is going to be the future, I really do," Handley said.

Help available

While the price tag for manufacturing technology has dropped, there are also grant opportunities for businesses looking to add new tech in their operations.

Conexus, which works with a variety of entities across the state to help identify challenges and create opportunities in advanced manufacturing and logistics, partners with the state on the Indiana Manufacturing Readiness Grants program. Through that initiative, the state could provide up to \$200,000 in 1:1 matching grants to companies completing projects to modernize operations or integrate smart technologies that can improve capacity, speed and quality.

"We're trying to reach as many companies as we can, all around the state," Landess said. "Especially in areas that are manufacturing-intense with a lot of manufacturing operations that maybe have been underrepresented in this program."

Landess said the grants program was announced in May 2020. He said state leaders want to see the economy succeed in Indiana, and that's among the reasons the grant program was developed.

He said Indiana is the most manufacturing-intense state in the country. There are around 9,300 manufacturers in the Hoosier state, and many of them are small to medium sized.

"They might not be as aggressive about adopting these technologies to enhance their productivity, their capability, their capacity," Landess said.

481 The number of Manufacturing Readiness Grants that have been awarded to businesses in Indiana in partnership with Conexus Indiana

When the program began in 2020, a total of \$4 million was available. Project officials anticipated they would likely dole out 20 to 30 awards, and it would take a couple years to do it, Landess said.

"We had, within the first 30 days of the program, 60 applications from manufacturers all over the state," he said.

Because of the success of the Readiness Grants, there was a need to expand the initiative.

"Ultimately more funding was put in, and we've been running the program ever since," Landess said.

Grant recipients

Economy Signs in Hammond was a recipient of a \$21,750 grant, and the company used that funding to help purchase a channel letter maker.

Walter Swets, the owner of Economy Signs, said the company's been using it for about a year.

"It makes aluminum letters, light up letters for storefronts," Swets said. "We were typically doing it by hand, and this made it much better, much faster. The quality is better because the machine does it. So, that helped out."

He said employees are thankful for the equipment, and Economy Signs has grown because of it.

"We've actually gotten busier because we can get more accomplished," Swets said. "We've actually been able to hire another person. It's done a lot."

He said this isn't the first time Economy Signs has turned to technology to enhance operations. The company added an automated router and large format printers before installing the channel letter equipment.

"I don't know what the next piece of equipment will be, but we're always looking for more," Swets said.

Konrady Plastics in Porter County is another area manufacturer. It received a \$45,000 award in 2020 from the Readiness Grants program.

Konrady, which produces parts for a variety of purposes such as conveyor belts, food processing equipment and fire hose nozzles, added a cobot to its operations because of the funding.

"We would not have pursued a cobot without this grant, at least not at this time," Leah Konrady, CEO of Konrady Plastics,



Photo provided by Economy Signs

Economy Signs in Hammond was a recipient of a \$21,750 Indiana Manufacturing Readiness Grant, and the company used that funding to help purchase a channel letter maker.

told Conexus. “With the grant funding, it was a no brainer. We needed to try it.”

Landess said cobots can perform repetitive tasks that are often viewed as boring to humans. He said the work that cobots

handle takes the place of jobs that can’t necessarily pay a high wage, and businesses often have trouble filling those roles. Landess said that doesn’t mean cobots are taking jobs away from people.

“If you have a cobot do it, you can have that person tend to five or six cobots instead of working by one machine,” he said.

He said that kind of work is more fulfilling than handling repetitive tasks, and tending to cobots provides better pay.

“They’re starting to be very easy to program, and so plant operators and technicians can easily set them up to do tasks for a couple hours or days or weeks, and then you can move them to another part of the plant and reprogram them pretty easily,” Landess said.

Landess encourages Indiana manufacturers who haven’t pursued the state’s Manufacturing Readiness Grants to follow the lead of Economy Signs and Konrady Plastics and visit www.conexusindiana.com/manufacturing-readiness-grants/ to learn how the program can benefit them.

“This is an invitation to get them to think strategically about the long-term future of their business and how they can leverage technology to set themselves up for success, to differentiate themselves, to innovate themselves and not just do more of the same,” Landess said.



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Streamlining processes

John DeSalle, the executive engineer in residence at iNDustry Labs at the University of Notre Dame, said he's quite familiar with the Readiness Grants program.

He said iNDustry Labs has written more than 35 Readiness Grants applications for its manufacturing partners in St. Joseph, Elkhart and Marshall counties.

"We're pretty successful in winning those awards for those companies," DeSalle said.

For companies that haven't added automation, taking on a project to add new tech can seem like a leap of faith. But if the state comes in with as much as \$200,000 toward that project, "it takes the risk off the table," DeSalle said.

He's noticed that once companies complete that first project and see the benefits, they're often more willing to do more technological enhancements in the future.

The grant applications are just a small aspect of what iNDustry Labs does.

MANUFACTURING READINESS GRANTS

In 2022, Conexus Indiana partnered with the Dauch Center for the Management of Manufacturing Enterprises at Purdue University to assess the impact of the Manufacturing Readiness Grants program, which has funded more than \$17 million in technology-driven investment in more than 60 Indiana counties. Key findings include:

1 Companies that adopted a smart manufacturing technology on average added five new positions; they also anticipated wages to grow on average \$196,000 per project.

2 The average revenue impact to companies was \$2.5 million, with 37 percent of those companies reporting that they anticipated revenue growth of more than 10 percent.

Source: www.conexusindiana.com/manufacturing-readiness-grants-program-2022-impact-report/

It was formed about three and a half years ago with the goal of helping regional manufacturers become more productive, improve their resiliency, and grow and attract talent to the Region.

To help companies make advancements toward automation, iNDustry Labs meets with them to better understand their needs. The organization then writes specs, creates business plans, calculates the ROI and drafts RFQs.

DeSalle said there are occasions in which companies want to implement automation, but they realize they don't have employees who can program and fix new machinery.

Along with partners such as Ivy Tech Community College, the South Bend-Elkhart Regional Partnership and the Northern Indiana Workforce Board, customized apprenticeship programs have been developed to address those issues.

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MANUFACTURING

“What we’re trying to do is upscale existing employees at those companies so that they can be the programmer for that automation, they can be the repair person, the maintenance guy,” DeSalle said.

DeSalle said automation is not there to displace people but to grow the business.

“Let’s take people doing jobs that people don’t want to do or shouldn’t do and use those people in the higher order function, and let’s give them skills and training to do it,” he said.

Through the data analytics area of iNDustry Labs, the organization collaborates with Notre Dame data scientists to review company data.

DeSalle said all manufacturers collect a ton of information from machines, their operations and their processes, but many times, they’re not using data to the full extent.

DeSalle said they’re able to create systems, programs and dashboards that can use that data to improve their manufacturing process and assist with decision making.

He recalled one company in which they examined its forecasts and orders to schedule the plant in a more efficient manner.

“We were able to increase their capacity 10% just by streamlining what order products go through the facility, so that data analytics is a big deal,” DeSalle said.

To help retain students after they graduate, iNDustry Labs develops student applied projects.

DeSalle said, if a company has a meaningful, compelling, difficult but nonurgent project, iNDustry Labs will make it a class.

He said students and course instructors will meet with company officials once a week as they work toward addressing their project.

The whole process accomplishes several goals. Students help solve the company’s issue, and the business gets a low-cost look at talent.

DeSalle said most students in the program have never been in a manufacturing environment and have preconceived notions of what it looks like. It can

be interesting to see them go into that environment and realize their notions were completely different from reality.

DeSalle said many companies use the project as a recruitment tool.

“Hopefully, job offers will get extended,” he said. “We’re beginning to turn the tide on retaining more of these bright young people that we educate, have them stay in the Region and continue to work for our manufacturers.”

It’s clear there’s much to consider when adding new technology in manufacturing, but many resources are available to guide companies along the way. And many experts agree it’s a worthy undertaking because technology can help companies become more competitive and win more business.

“It’s not just more of the same business, they often are able to expand their capabilities in addition to their capacity,” Landess said. “They pick up new customers, they enter new markets, they sometimes launch new products because the automation gives them new capabilities they didn’t have before.” ■

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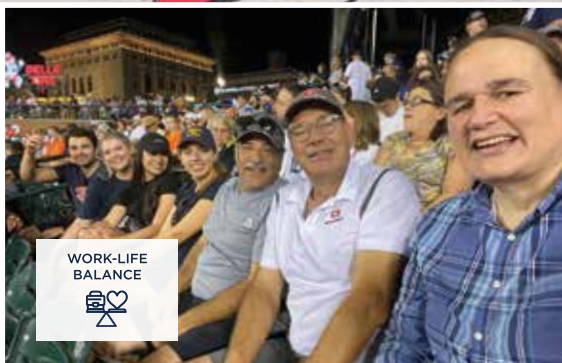
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Franciscan Health encourages community members to learn how to experience the calming influence of nature through breathing exercises and forest bathing-skills, which can be used to improve focus and reduce stress. This walk took place in the St. Francis Nature Preserve, 3500 Franciscan Way in Michigan City.

Photo provided by Franciscan Health

WORKING WELL

REGIONAL LEADERS SHARE WHAT IT MEANS TO SUPPORT WORKERS' EMOTIONAL HEALTH

LAUREN CAGGIANO

Mental health, though still stigmatized, is no longer an issue that can be pushed under the rug, regional experts say.

State legislators have made the issue a priority this year by setting up a new crisis hotline and earmarking more than \$100 million for mental health in the state budget. A report by the Indiana Behavioral Health Commission estimated that untreated mental health costs the state \$4.2 billion a year.

The reality is that organizations of all kinds and sizes are impacted by mental health challenges because employees don't usually leave their problems at home.

Workers in the Hoosier state are no exception. Almost two-thirds of Indiana employers knew they had employees struggling with mental health last year, according to a Wellness Council of Indiana survey released in July 2023. But just a quarter trained management to spot the signs of mental illness and take action.

A call to action

This inaction isn't acceptable nor sustainable if you ask regional mental health professionals like Dr. Dawnzar Howard-Jones, a psychiatrist and medical director at Edgewater Health in Gary. According to Howard-Jones,

positive results in the workplace start with conversations at the executive level.

"I think probably the No. 1 (way to improve outcomes) is talking about mental health," she said. "I think that's the first step. We can't really address mental health if we don't talk about things like depression and anxiety."

In other words, the stigma is still real and can negatively impact people personally and professionally. Howard-Jones says it's better than in years past, but there's still a lot of room for improvement.

That's especially the case in marginalized communities, where a mental health challenge is often seen as a weakness or deficit. This means that people



aren't willing to seek help because they feel shame. However, by changing the narrative around mental illness, we can help people live fuller, richer lives.

"Instead, we should be approaching it like we do with diabetes and hypertension — that with medications and treatment, people can get better," she said. "They work regular jobs. They're doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc. Anybody can get mental illness. And it looks different for different people. So, I think the more we talk about it, the more we'll see that we don't have to whisper about it."

Expanding EAPs

Some organizations like Purdue University Northwest and Franciscan Health are taking note, leading with bold wellness initiatives.

PNW has a robust employee assistance program (EAP) that allows faculty and staff to bring their best selves to work.

Sue Miller, associate vice chancellor for human resources, has immersed herself in this work. She oversees all the HR functions pertaining to the Hammond and Westville campuses. One trend she's observed in recent years is the popularity of their third-party EAP. She said enrollment has tripled in the past five years, and the pandemic likely was a major driver.

Being sensitive to the challenges this global crisis brought to the fore, Miller said, the university upped the ante on its wellness benefits.

"It was a time when people were very stressed out," she said. "They weren't sure what was going on. So, we increased our employee assistance program benefits. We went from three visits to 10 visits per year."

Miller said increasing the number of visits helped employees better manage stress, grief, isolation and uncertainty. The feedback was that increasing the number of sessions helped them dive deeper into these challenges and feel more centered.

Beyond the utility, Miller said that tracking specific metrics has allowed her team to keep their finger on the pulse of trends related to employee mental health and the demand for such programs. This allows them to adjust if necessary.

Miller's colleague Colleen Robison, associate director of benefits, said partnerships with vendors like Anthem have been fruitful, too. The insurance

company has an emotional wellness program available free to members. Employees can take short assessments that gauge emotional health and access self-paced courses that target challenges like stress, anxiety, worry and insomnia.

"You do it on your own time in the comfort of your own home or wherever and receive some education, support and tools," Robison said.

Robison and Miller both agree that these benefits have made Purdue an employer of choice.

Julie Kisse, administrative director of Franciscan's EAP, affirms that these programs can give organizations a competitive edge. However, the commitment must be more than surface level, or it can come across as hollow and won't resonate with potential employees. It can mean digging deeper to ensure the organizational culture is healthy.

"Organizations must understand that in order to attract staff, they have to pay attention to the work environment," she said. "We have to look at that and make sure that they're not one of those organizations that isn't listening to what they need."

According to Kisse, the goal is to create a culture where change is integrated into the organization's DNA for the better. It's an existential challenge in today's employee-driven market. For instance, she hears feedback that employees want resources on mindfulness, work-life balance, preparing for the future and self-care now more than ever.

"So I think the push-back from the organization is (due to the fact that) they never had to think about it from the employee perspective as much as today," she said.

Leading by example

Centier Bank, however, is one local institution that has maintained a longstanding investment in employee well-being.

Tami Janda, the bank's wellness coordinator, said Centier's approach to employee benefits reflects its values as a family-owned business. It's about taking care of the 1,000 people who contribute to the bottom line. Janda said she feels empowered by the leadership to support the organization's culture.

Beyond perks that promote physical wellness — like a free onsite health clinic and health coaching — they also contribute to employee mental wellbeing. For instance, Janda said they have lunch-and-learn programming to educate staff about various topics related to mental health.

"Right now, we're making a big push to offer more support in the mental health world," Janda said. "We realized that, especially since COVID, a lot of our associates reported feelings of anxiety, depression and burnout. And so we're working on that."

Specifically, Janda said they're doing a lot around remote work's impact on

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

"The No. 1 (way to improve outcomes) is talking about mental health. ... We can't really address mental health if we don't talk about things like depression and anxiety."

— Dr. Dawnzar Howard-Jones
Edgewater Health



"Organizations must understand that in order to attract staff, they have to pay attention to the work environment."

— Julie Kisse
Franciscan Health



mental health and how mindfulness can be a tool in the mental health toolbox. They want employees to feel like they can slow down and take breaks occasionally. This is a case when modeling from leadership is particularly important. Janda said the examples must come from the top for employees to take it seriously and follow through.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Julie Kisse, administrative director of Franciscan's EAP, has some practical tips for employees to show up as their best selves at work.

What are some proven tips employees can use on the job to foster wellness?

- Have your annual physical completed every year with your primary care physician.
- Take your lunch away from your work area.
- Incorporate movement into your day if you sit at a desk for the majority of the day.
- Learn desk yoga/stretching techniques and implement them regularly throughout the day.
- Increase your supportive professional relationships with mentors, positive co-workers.
- Utilize or improve organizational skills: Keep your work area organized and have a safe, welcoming area to perform your job duties.
- Make your desk your own: decorate, personalize, make comfortable. This helps to reduce stress.
- Participate in wellness activities when offered: walking challenges, de-cluttering challenges, lunch-time group walks, healthy eating demos.
- Set a positive tone every morning by completing an entry in a gratitude journal.
- Use or improve assertive communication skills to assist in healthy communication and

respectful conflict resolution. Remember, diversity is a good thing in the workforce, and with diversity brings many different perspectives and approaches to accomplish business goals. There is room for everyone to present their ideas, and there is a need for integration of all ideas to grow.

How can employees advocate for themselves in a workplace setting?

- Request wellbeing programming in the work environment.
- Request wellbeing resources: EAP services, health coaching, work-out facilities.
- Use chain of command and discuss fair treatment issues if needed.
- Provide ideas, wants and concerns during surveys, town hall meetings and open forum discussions.
- Identify the issue with at least three recommended solutions. Focusing just on the problem will keep you feeling bad, but when you look at possible solutions, it changes the direction to possible action and creativity.
- Request healthy nutritional choices in the cafeteria and during employee appreciation events.

Provided by Franciscan Health

Sometimes the best approach is the most obvious, Janda said.

"Some employers might already have some benefits," she said. "(Employees might need) education on how you use your benefits to enrich your life. After your orientation, you tend to forget about all the benefits that are offered to you until you absolutely need them. That's why re-educating the employees about the benefits they do have and how they can use them, and then incentivizing them to do so (can drive action)."

A helping hand

Andrea Sherwin knows what motivates employers and employees to adopt and sustain mental health programs.

As president and CEO of Mental Health America of Northwest Indiana, she helps Northwest Indiana companies determine the best way to engage employees by way of a data-centric approach through one of their initiatives.

The plans are customized to the organization's situation and goals.

"We might talk to an organization that does not have an EAP program and discuss why that's important and how that might help," she said. "So (then) we can construct a plan. And then licensed social workers go in and present information (to the workforce) based on feedback from the employer."

Employers outside of the nonprofit's service area can still seek help in this

way. For instance, the Wellness Council of Indiana provides free, virtual consultation services and support to Indiana organizations that seek guidance in evolving their workplace mental health and overall wellbeing efforts. They also aggregate data related to physical and mental health and offer programming that attempts to bridge the gap.

Similarly, Sherwin's team keeps current on trends that impact employee well-being and human resources. She said her peers engage in advocacy at the national level.

"There's a lot of big topics (being discussed) now around mental health," she said. "One of the things that we advocated for pretty heavily was the new suicide prevention hotline (988)."

Indiana opted to invest in a broader crisis response system to help all Hoosiers. The Family and Social Services Administration said the move toward a dedicated number will ultimately include more than just someone to contact at a 988 center, but also someone to respond and a safe place for help, if needed. The work, which started in July 2022, will continue over the next six to nine years. According to the Family and Social Services Administration, pilot projects will establish these services through providers throughout the state.

More than 7,000 calls were made to the 988 number in Indiana alone between April and May this year, according to AXIOS Indianapolis. Some experts are concerned the funding will not last.

But legislators say they are dedicated to the mental health of Hoosiers. Senate Enrolled Act 1's goal is to help people access treatment more quickly. It directs state funding to be used to improve the state's response to mental health emergencies and expand the network of clinics offering services. The new state law earmarks dollars toward the state's network of certified community behavioral health centers, allowing them to hire more staff and expand programs provided.

"There's a lot of talk right now about needing additional funding and legislation around expanding staffing so there's a robust support network around that," Sherwin said. ■

↑ CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES ↓

Region experts explain what diversity, equity and inclusion mean to companies and their employees





CONVERSATION STA

REGION COMPANIES EMBRACE DEI IN WORK



Brown Faces Green Spaces, Shirley Heinze Land Trust & Audubon Great Lakes celebrate National Trails Day at Ivanhoe South Nature Preserve in Gary in 2022.

KERRY SAPET

"Diversity," "equity" and "inclusion" are more than buzz words. They hold the key to building strong, successful and sustainable organizations.

"Groups who look and think the same easily fall into tunnel vision," said Jay Lewis, partner at THK Law LLP. "Having a diverse group around the table helps us find more creative and interesting

solutions to our clients' problems."

In an increasingly interconnected and diverse world, the concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion have become a central focus in the national business landscape. Companies in Northwest Indiana are no different. Many businesses across the Region are working to cultivate a more inclusive workplace culture.

"In our Region I do see a change," said Dr. Vanessa Allen-McCloud,

president and CEO of the Urban League of Northwest Indiana. "We really strive to work together, to do more and to be more inclusive. Increasing numbers of leaders in organizations are reaching out to us. They are calling to say, 'We want to do better. Can we just start the conversation? It's time for us to talk about this.'"

The trio of diversity, equity and inclusion are often grouped together

RTER

PLACE CULTURE



76%

The number of workers and job seekers who said diversity was important in job offers — LinkedIn

20%

The percent that innovation goes up when there is diversity in thought — Deloitte



Photo provided by Kimmie Gordon

and referred to as DEI. Justice and belonging are also integral components. The concepts behind the five words — diversity, equity, inclusion, justice and belonging — are similar but distinct. Each is like a thread in a fabric, creating something stronger when woven together.

Breaking down each concept can help small businesses learn more about diversifying their workplaces.

D The “D” in DEI refers to diversity — the mosaic of differences that individuals bring to the table.

Diversity is sometimes misunderstood to be solely about race.

“The concept encompasses so much more,” said Neil Samahon, president and CEO of Opportunity Enterprises Inc. in Valparaiso. “Race and ethnicity are certainly an important component, so is gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion and socioeconomic status, as well as national origin. Our focus here at Opportunity Enterprises is disability, both visible and invisible disabilities.”

A diverse workforce brings an array of perspectives, experiences and talents. According to studies by McKinsey & Company and Deloitte, diverse companies are 35% more likely to outperform their competitors. The study found that diversity in thought can enhance team innovation by up to 20%.

“When I look at diversity, I think about the value that brings,” Samahon said. “In the workplace, we all look to hire people who can add value. It can certainly be found in the perspectives that people of varying backgrounds bring to the job.”

Robert Kopka, founding partner of Kopka Pinkus Dolin that has a location in Crown Point, has played a strategic role in the company’s DEI work. The firm is RING (Recognizing Inclusion for the Next Generation) certified and a member of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association.

“Diversifying helps us better understand the world around us, bringing in new and unique perspectives,” Kopka said. “It also helps us represent our clients better.”

Centier Bank in Merrillville is another company putting diversity at the forefront.

“We started with establishing our mission statement: ‘To create an inclusive culture where all forms of diversity are seen as real, equal value for the bank,’” said Michelle Maravilla, senior vice president of human resources.

In 2021, the Urban League of Northwest Indiana presented Centier Bank with a Workplace Diversity Award. Maravilla is part of the bank’s diversity, equity and inclusion council. The council was founded in 2020 to represent different marginalized groups and to effect change within the organization.

“Diversity really is a general awareness of our differences and celebrating them to the point where we’re creating a better, stronger community in the workplace and where we live,” Maravilla said.

E Equity, represented by the “E,” means providing equal opportunities and resources to all individuals, regardless of their background or identity.

“Equity involves acknowledging and eliminating historic and current phenomena that disadvantage some people and benefit others,” said Colette Morrow, professor of English and director of women’s, gender and sexuality studies at Purdue University Northwest.

Companies often work toward equity by addressing pay disparities and offering mentorship and development programs. This work aims to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities and is treated the same.

“Equity is ensuring there’s a level playing field, that everyone has equal access to resources,” said Geri Aglipay, a regional administrator for the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Aglipay oversees the Great Lakes region, which stretches from Minnesota to Ohio. The administration’s mission is to help American entrepreneurs start and grow new businesses.



YOUR GUIDES

These eight experts share their thoughts on DEI strategy:



GERI AGLIPAY

U.S. SBA

Regional administrator



DR. VANESSA ALLEN-McCLOUD

URBAN LEAGUE

President and CEO



KIMMIE GORDON

BROWN FACES

GREEN SPACES

Executive director



ROBERT KOPKA

KOPKA PINKUS

DOLIN

Founding partner



JAY LEWIS

THK LAW LLP

Partner



MICHELLE MARAVILLA

CENTIER BANK

Senior vice president of human resources



COLETTE MORROW

PURDUE

UNIVERSITY NWI

Professor of English



NEIL SAMAHON

OPPORTUNITY

ENTERPRISES INC.

President and CEO

Supporting entrepreneurs, especially those in socially and economically disadvantaged communities, helps to promote equity.

"Equity is, unfortunately, not always equality. It's hard to have equality without fairness," Maravilla said. "If we can help those who are marginalized have the same opportunities as those who are not, then I think we are getting closer to equity and only then can we ensure equality."

The "I" in DEI stands for inclusion — the act of creating an environment where all employees feel valued, respected and empowered to contribute their unique perspectives.

"Inclusion is important because an organization or group can be diverse while lacking a climate of respect," Morrow said. "Without an inclusive, respectful organizational culture, some members are prevented from participating and achieving according to their full potential. In an inclusive environment, everyone is valued and trusted, and all feel safe being authentic."

An inclusive workplace promotes collaboration, engagement and overall employee well-being.

"One key to inclusion is giving people a voice, a chance for their thoughts and opinions to be heard and given equal weight with others," Lewis said. "It's important to provide opportunity and encouragement so that ideas and opinions from underrepresented voices are heard and taken seriously."

Samahon succinctly sums up the concept of inclusion. "Individuals with disabilities don't simply want to be accepted as they are, they want to be included as they are," he said.

While not included in the traditional DEI acronym, "justice" is sometimes added to create DEIJ.

Justice emphasizes the need to address historical and systemic inequities and to actively work toward a fair and just society.

"When it comes to justice, it is and should be, about fair (equitable) treatment across the board," Samahon said. "Include all communities, sometimes that's based on location, other times it can be a community of individuals with similar needs or challenges."

Many companies, like THK Law, view DEI work as a learning process.

"It's about looking at internal policies and processes — even traditions — that might be holding back DEI progress," Lewis said. "There is no one initiative or training that will result in a more diverse and inclusive organization. You must be patient, strategic and open to things

being done a little differently."

In 2022, Lewis's firm met off-site at the Civil Rights Heritage Center in South Bend for a morning training session. This year, they will meet at La Casa De Amistad, a Latino community center.

Conversations involving DEI and justice can be difficult, said Kimmie Gordon, founder and executive director of Brown Faces Green Spaces, an environmental justice organization in Gary.

"It's up to people being open-minded enough. It takes time; it doesn't happen overnight. These conversations are uncomfortable but very necessary," Gordon said. "You have to create a safe and welcoming place for these conversations to take place. In my experience, being open, direct and honest in these conversations has proved to be most

"When an associate feels fully accepted, valued and empowered to be their authentic selves, it breeds connectedness throughout the organization, the community and the world at large."

— Michelle Maravilla
Centier Bank

productive. Tiptoeing around the subject is not the answer.”

B Some versions of the acronym include “belonging,” leading to the acronym DEIJB.

“Belonging involves developing a welcoming culture that supports everyone’s success,” Morrow said. “It also entails creating a sense of community in which all members feel connected.”

Belonging focuses on creating an environment where individuals feel like they are an integral part of the organization and are valued for what they bring to the table.

“When an associate feels fully accepted, valued and empowered to be their authentic selves, it breeds connectedness throughout the organization, the community and the world at large,” Maravilla said. “It goes beyond being present in the

“Creating a welcoming environment for all persons starts with looking deep within the roots of the organizational structure at the mission and purpose statements.”

— Kimmie Gordon, Brown Faces Green Spaces

workplace; it’s about feeling aligned with the organization’s values, culture and mission.”

She said this type of thinking helps develop better relationships with the bank’s associates and clients.

“When employees have a sense of belonging, they are more likely to engage, contribute meaningfully and thrive in their roles,” she said.

Kopka Pinkus Dolin promotes belonging in several ways, Kopka said. The firm has committees that work on recruitment, mentoring, programming and events. They also have affinity groups, which are groups of people who share a common under-represented characteristic, such as race, sexual orientation or gender.

“The committees provide educational opportunities and awareness, and events to not only entertain but

celebrate our uniqueness,” Kopka said. “We celebrate each other through our internal newsletter, in-person social events, roundtable discussions, and external events like our annual Juneteenth presentation and involvement in the Pride parade.”

Implementing DEI

“Everyone wants to diversify now, but oftentimes they don’t exactly know where to start,” Gordon said.

Allen-McCloud suggests conducting an anonymous survey as a first step. A survey can help establish the topics of interest to employees, such as stereotypes or LGBTQ+ issues. It can also determine if there have been any incidents, such as microaggressions — subtle, everyday interactions that communicate bias toward a group.

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"A survey is like taking a temperature reading of their organization," Allen-McCloud said.

The Urban League of Northwest Indiana works with multiple organizations in Lake, Porter and La Porte counties to provide diversity training. They help organizations looking to implement DEI initiatives and organizations looking to strengthen and expand their current DEI efforts.

"It's not one training session and done to check off a mark," Allen-McCloud said.

Brown Faces Green Spaces also works with organizations in the Region to strengthen their DEI initiatives.

"I partner with other local environmental organizations like Save the Dunes and the Shirley Heinze Land Trust to help them understand the dynamics of reaching a more diverse audience," Gordon said. "I share my knowledge and skill to help them incorporate culture not just color."

An organization providing DEI training can help facilitate what Allen-McCloud calls "courageous conversations."

"You have to get down and do the gritty work of considering how to truly create equity, justice and belonging in your organization," Gordon said. "It's more than just hiring diverse people."

Leading change

Workplace diversity initiatives focus on multiple aspects: organizational policies and practices, training and organizational culture.

Addressing policies may include examining hiring practices, pay inequities and poor employee retention among marginalized groups. Training and workshops can encourage people to be more mindful of discrimination on a personal level.

"Creating a welcoming environment for all persons starts with looking deep within the roots of the organizational structure at the mission and purpose statements," Gordon said. "It's about getting in touch with the internal operations of an organization to make decisions about equity that truly count. You need to truly look at the structure

of an organization from the inside out, not just from the outside in."

Another important aspect is leadership commitment. When company leaders show a dedication to DEI principles, it sets the tone for the entire organization. In many businesses across the Region, DEI efforts have started at top levels of management and worked their way down to employees. Kopka Pinkus Dolin is just one example.

"We are proud that our DEI initiatives and policies are supported from the top-down," Kopka said. "Our core values and firm culture are emphasized during the interviewing process and shown through our comradery and supported by each individual at the firm."

Educating employees

According to the Pew Research Center, as of May 2023, the majority of employed U.S. adults say focusing on DEI at work is beneficial.

Surveyed employees report that DEI-related policies and resources have had a positive impact at their workplace. However, only 4 in 10



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employees participated in DEI training in the last year.

Workplace training and workshops can increase awareness about inclusive communication, implicit (or unconscious) bias and cultural competence. The American Psychological Association defines implicit bias as “a negative attitude of which one is not consciously aware, against a specific social group.” Cultural competence is a person’s ability to understand and respect values, attitudes and beliefs that differ across cultures.

Companies in the Region are forging the way by providing ongoing DEI education to employees at all levels.

“Centier has a 21-day challenge for teams and managers who have this as a resource to work through and build teams together,” Maravilla said. “We have unconscious bias training. I love this class because I think it’s eye opening to learn about where bias lies in all of us and how it can impact decisions and it can impact the organization as a whole.”

Diverse hiring

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, small businesses generate two of every three jobs in the nation. Approximately 99% of Indiana businesses are small businesses. They employ 1.2 million Hoosiers.

Small businesses can make a big difference. Many companies in the Region are implementing more inclusive hiring practices that focus on attracting diverse candidates. They are rewriting job postings and rethinking traditional methods of interviewing candidates.

“It is vital that all job postings provide equal opportunities to all candidates, regardless of disabilities, and use inclusive language in job descriptions,” Samahon said. “All job postings and the application and interview process need to be accessible for all people, including those with varying disabilities.”

Although Samahon’s organization looks through the lens of hiring individuals with disabilities, such inclusive efforts apply to all

historically underrepresented groups of individuals.

“We are seeing leadership within organizations that promote a culture of diversity and inclusion throughout the business,” Samahon said. “There has been a more robust shift with out-of-the-box thinking in the area of accessibility in the workplace (workspace), job sharing and flexibility within the work

environment to accommodate the varying needs of individuals.”

Other companies in the Region are working with minority and student organizations to provide apprenticeships.

“At Kopka Pinkus Dolin, we started our legal apprentice program in 2020 in an effort to create a pipeline of diverse talent,” Kopka said. “Today, three years later, our first legal

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Photo provided by Kopka Pinkus Dolin

Kopka Pinkus Dolin is a proud sponsor of the Buffalo Grove Pride Parade in Illinois. The firm is RING (Recognizing Inclusion for the Next Generation) certified and a member of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association.

apprentice is a first-year lawyer, and three legal apprentices are awaiting their bar results and plan to join us as attorneys. We are thrilled to be welcoming additional legal apprentices to the firm this fall."

THK Law also sees the need for diversity in the legal profession. However, Lewis is encouraged by the strides he has noticed in Northwest Indiana.

"For the legal profession, race is an important place to start, given the historically low percentage of Black and Latino attorneys in Indiana law firms," Lewis said. "It's encouraging to see more diversity in the legal profession, particularly in the leadership ranks as partners and as judges."

A company's approach and philosophy can be vital to diverse hiring and retaining individuals in the long term.

"Companies we work with see the value the individuals with disabilities, or I think what is more appropriate to say is different abilities, add to their organizations," Samahon said. "A win is when employers realize that hiring someone with a disability is not an act of philanthropy but a decision to add value through the individual's diversity."

DEI matters

Research shows that workplace DEI efforts have social and financial advantages. Organizations are finding that when individuals from diverse backgrounds collaborate, their varied perspectives can lead to more innovative ideas and solutions.

Business owners also have seen that diversity of thought translates into better decision-making. Companies prioritizing DEI have found that they are better equipped to anticipate the needs and preferences of a diverse customer base.

Organizations with DEI initiatives are more likely to attract a diverse pool of candidates and retain employees who feel valued and included. According to a LinkedIn study, 76% of employees and job seekers said company diversity was an important factor when considering employment offers. In a competitive job market, top talent often seeks workplaces that align with their values.

"It can add value to a company's brand," Samahon said. "It can attract a workforce that values inclusivity — something we're finding in the younger individuals as they enter the workforce."

Consumers are also increasingly drawn to companies that reflect their values. Organizations that embody DEI principles demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility, which can positively impact brand perception and customer loyalty.

A Harvard Business Review study found that diverse companies were 70% likelier to expand to a new market audience.

Building relationships

To Aglipay, who has more than 20 years of experience in entrepreneurship and economic development, small businesses tend to think differently about employees.

"Small businesses like to think of employees as family," she said.

Many companies focusing on DEI report that the workshops and conversations have shaped them into a more cohesive team and brightened their workplace culture.

"Having the ability to make work a place to have these conversations and bring associates together creates a stronger sense of family," Maravilla said. "Our DE&I efforts have paved the way for vulnerability and storytelling to strengthen our associates and our pillar of friendship as part of our company's core values."

Companies in the Region say that DEI initiatives have helped foster better relationships with each other and in the community.

"Deep down inside, we want to work harder to build relationships, not work in silos," Allen-McCloud said. "When you see me, what you see is just 10%. We need to get to the 90%. It's like an iceberg, there's so much more under the waterline."

Organizations that champion DEI are unlocking potential within their walls and in their communities.

"What would I say to another organization who wanted to implement DEI in their workplace culture?" Maravilla said. "Somebody just needs to start the conversation. That's all it takes. Start the conversation." ●



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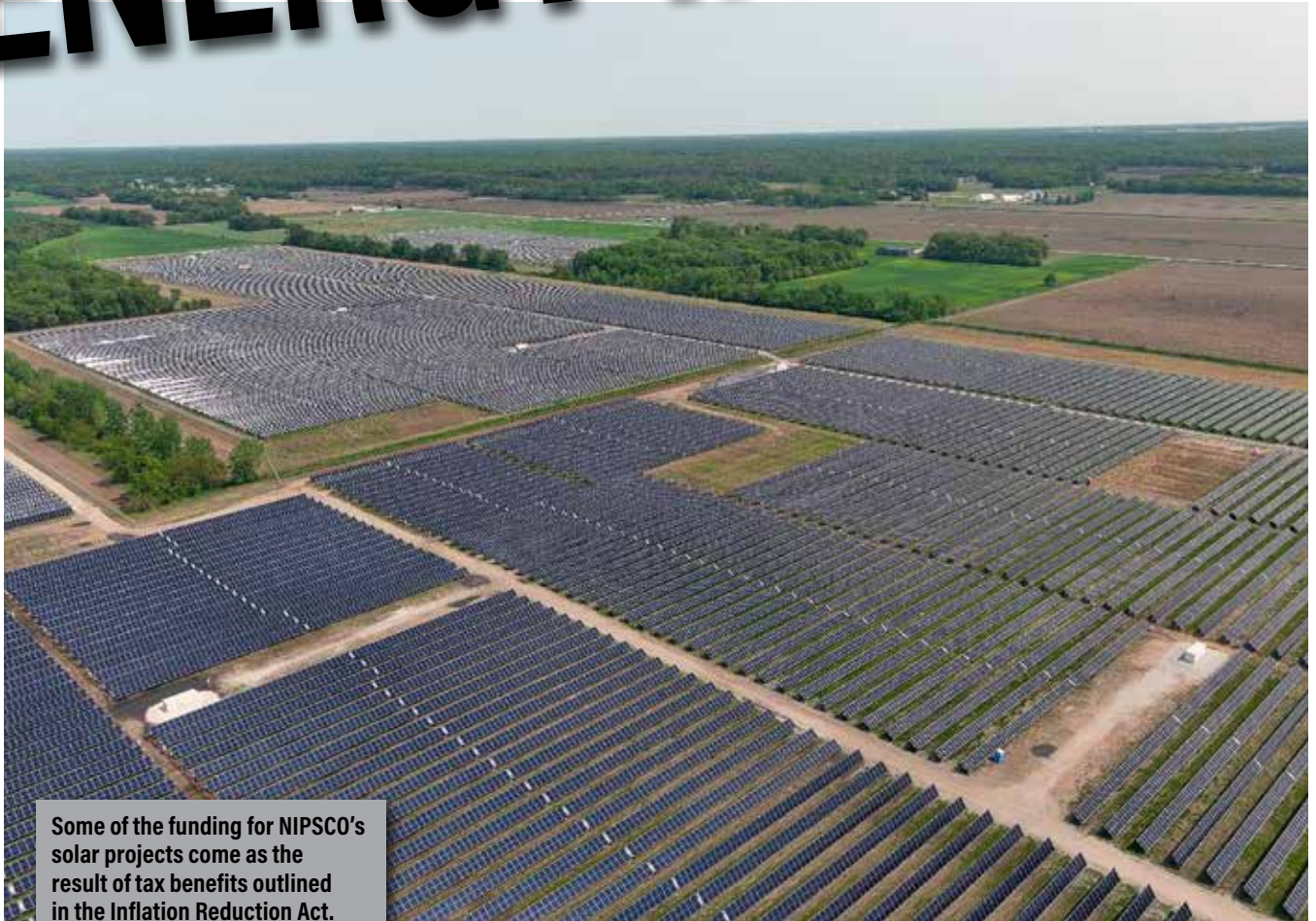


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ENERGY INCENTIV



Some of the funding for NIPSCO's solar projects come as the result of tax benefits outlined in the Inflation Reduction Act.

Photo provided by NIPSCO

GET EXTRA (TAX) CREDIT FOR HELPING SAVE WORLD FROM EFFECTS OF CHANGING CLIMATE

BILL DOLAN

The federal government is betting that Americans can be enticed to decarbonize their cars and homes with a little tax deduction love.

The Inflation Reduction Act is a package of new and enlarged energy tax incentives designed to spur a buying frenzy of electric vehicles, energy-efficient appliances and home improvements to reduce fossil fuel emissions.

Climate change roiled public discourse years before Congress passed last year's legislation. The Environmental

Protection Agency proclaimed it "the most significant climate legislation in U.S. history."

Its supporters say the tax credits that went into effect last January will overcome any sticker shock discouraging consumers from buying clean-energy systems.

More sweeteners, like tax rebates, will soon roll out, although not before 2024 in Indiana.

How businesses can ride the IRA's incentive wave is a little more complicated.

Business opportunities

Electric vehicle credits are available for medium- and heavy-duty commercial electric vehicles. Help for electric utility companies to pivot away from coal toward solar and wind power generation is too.

But the IRA primarily caters to individuals, say J.T. Eagan, of Purdue University Northwest, and Jaclyn Barkow, of Indiana University Northwest. The two accounting professors also run NWI Tax LLC.

"My clients aren't buying energy efficient things just to save taxes, but when



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they are purchasing an electric vehicle, they come to me to know what tax incentives qualify," she said.

Resources like electricforall.org and energystar.gov list a multitude of energy tax credits available, but Barkow cautions the amount taxpayers can pocket is hedged by their income level and final tax liability.

So, the IRA should be a boon to accounting services needed to help businesses and individuals navigate this energy tax credit landscape.

For Devin Hall, a managing partner with the international Crowe energy investment team, the IRA's benefits are long term.

"The IRA is a game changer," he said. "I just see it moving capital into green-energy investments."

Hall said he has 45 clients in need of Crowe's advice on the IRA and 14 calls scheduled to discuss energy tax credits.

"There are companies and people out there saying we can make it work if there is a significant subsidy," he said. "Let's see if we can get a return on the investment."

Wendy Bredhold, a senior campaign representative for the Indiana chapter of the Sierra Club, which supported the IRA's passage, agrees that the benefits of the IRA will be felt for years to come.

"This is a great deal," she said. "It could create millions of clean-energy jobs and reduce climate pollution 40% by 2030."

But not everyone is a fan.

"It is industrial pork barrel gone mad," said Scott Hodge, president emeritus of the Washington, D.C.-based Tax Foundation.

"If you want less carbon, tax it and let the marketplace figure it out," he added.

Seeing the light

Some Northern Indiana businesses are embracing climate change initiatives. John Matusik, director of property management for Merrillville-based Centier Bank, said they recently upgraded 95 percent of lighting — about 6,000 bulbs and lamps — inside and outside their 60 locations.

"Our focus was being more energy efficient and just trying to be as green as we can," Matusik said.

It cost Centier \$57,000 to replace incandescent lamps with more expensive LEDs. The Northern Indiana Public Service Co. provided planning assistance and a cash rebate for each new bulb. Matusik added Centier's corporate campus in Merrillville has been serviced by heat pumps for years.

Chase Bank installed solar panels at its St. John branch office in fall 2022, part of a nationwide goal to complete solar installations at hundreds of branches.

T.J. Kanczuzewski, co-founder of South Bend-based Inovateus Solar, said the IRA will continue solar energy tax credits — a write-off of 30 percent for owners who purchase a solar panel array plus installation costs.



A Tesla Supercharger Station is available at the Indian Boundary Plaza, 706 Plaza Drive, Chesterton — a half mile south of the Indiana 49 interchange with I-94.

Photo by Bill Dolan

"That has been the major catalyst for solar projects since 2004 and kept solar manufacturers profitable," he said.

"The law will incentivize the purchase of solar panels made in the United States. I think this is all positive," he said.

Hot wheels

Electric cars are another example of the IRA's goal to bring long-term investment in the U.S.

"We have five electric vehicles on the lot available for test drives," said Pierce Alwine, a sales specialist for Gurley

Leep Ford of South Bend. "Our Mustang Mach-E's are getting attention."

But, he said, incentives aren't what all customers are interested in.

"They ask about the tax credit, but that's not the main reason they are looking," Alwine said. "People buy because (EV's) are new and they're hot."

General Motors and Samsung SDI plan to spend more than \$3 billion on building a battery cell plant for electric vehicles in St. Joseph County's New Carlisle. It promises to create 1,700 jobs starting in 2026.

Indiana-registered electric-only plug-in cars currently number about

8,000, said Kaylee May of Clean Cities of Greater Indiana.

"People are buying them in Indiana, and tax credits are starting to help it grow," May said. "Everything is showing that they will be outpacing combustion vehicle adoption by 2036."

As for where to charge them, the Greencars.com website lists more than 20 electric vehicle charging stations available to the public in Hammond, Highland, Cedar Lake, Hobart, Portage, Chesterton, Valparaiso, Michigan City and South Bend.



Photo provided by Bill Dolan

Writer Bill Dolan invited a couple of energy advisers from Merrillville's TRC, a professional services firm, to his house this summer to evaluate how energy efficient it is.

Energetic residential

Is your home thoroughly modernized?

My wife and I are always looking for ways to upgrade our 44-year-old house — about the average age for a Hoosier residential structure.

We bought a new HVAC system and water heater four years ago, doors and windows range from 14 to 25 years old, so are they up to date? Is there enough blown-in attic insulation?

I consulted the U.S. Department of Energy website for thoughts on home-based savings; Homewyse, Homeadvisor or Forbes Home for estimates of upfront material and installation costs; and Energystar.gov for available tax credits on heat pumps, solar panels and all energy ideas clean and efficient.

To avoid information overload and get a little friendly advice, we invited a couple of energy advisers from Merrillville's TRC over this summer to look over our house.

It's a no-cost service available through Northern Indiana Public Service Co. For more information, visit NIPSCO.com/save.

Home assessment

Joe Stump and Ronald Carlson spent an hour walking through every room of my house and its basement and even climbed into my attic for a visual assessment of every light fixture, appliance, doors and windows.

Then without any sales pitches or eco sermons, I got Stump's verdict. "Not bad," he said.

They gave me high marks for a relatively snug house and appliances bearing the Energy Star efficiency icon.

I got down rated for still using a freezer chest we purchased in 1978, when the original "Star Wars" movie was still playing in select theaters. Stump said he understood why I kept it. "That's how most people feel." He added that a current model freezer would take about a third less energy to run.

Nothing was said about taking out our natural gas stove, though there is a credit for a new electric oven.

Stump did spot and change out a couple dozen incandescent lights, free of charge, with more efficient LED bulbs.

— Bill Dolan

What's coming

Indiana has yet to roll out additional tax rebates — money the government will refund taxpayers for the installation of clean energy systems and appliances, as well as more energy efficient home improvements.

Ryan Hadley, executive director of the Indiana Office of Energy Development, said the IRA is allotting \$182 million for Indiana to dole out, but working out the details of how to administer these programs means the cash won't become available until next year.

Hadley said public power utilities already offer energy efficiency rebates to customers, including NIPSCO with 468,000, and Kankakee Valley REMC with more than 18,000 residential and commercial members across Northern Indiana.

Tara McElmurry, NIPSCO communications manager, said NIPSCO's energy efficiency partner TRC of Merrillville helps assess customer needs during home and business office visits and provides information on how to obtain NIPSCO rebates on thermostats, LED lighting, HVAC duct sealing and other energy savers.

She said NIPSCO administrative team members have identified provisions in the IRA that incentivize investment in renewable generation and continually stay abreast of policy changes that will benefit business and residential customers.

McElmurry said NIPSCO has been bringing renewable projects online and taking advantage of applicable tax credits to help offset costs.

"For example, the IRA provides for a bonus 10% tax credit for new projects that are in 'energy communities,' such as the counties where NIPSCO's coal-fired generation units are retiring," she said. "Some of NIPSCO's renewable projects are expected to qualify for this bonus."

NIPSCO customers also will receive 100% of the benefits of these tax incentives through lower operational costs reflected in customer bills, she said.

"In addition to tax credits, customers are already benefiting from NIPSCO's renewable energy resources by receiving all the revenue when excess power is generated and sold into the market," McElmurry added. "Since 2021, more than \$60 million in credits has gone back to customers associated with excess

“(The Inflation Reduction Act) is a great deal. It could create millions of clean-energy jobs and reduce climate pollution 40% by 2030.”

— Wendy Bredhold
Indiana chapter of the Sierra Club



“The energy transformation is not an ‘if’ question, but a ‘when.’ We see the IRA having positive implications for our cooperative.”

— Scott Sears
Kankakee Valley REMC



power and renewable energy credit sales from the company’s new renewable and existing generating units.”

Scott Sears, Kankakee Valley REMC’s CEO, said his cooperative is actively pursuing new accessible federal funds to expand clean energy production and storage.

“The energy transformation is not an ‘if’ question, but a ‘when,’” he said. “We see the IRA having positive implications for our cooperative.”

Carbon tax?

Indiana University professor David Konisky, an expert in environmental and energy policy governance, said imposing a carbon tax “has turned out to be politically nonviable.”

“So given the confines of politics and the possibilities, I think Congress went about as far as it could go, and we can celebrate that,” he said. “But will it get us all the way where we need to go in terms of efficiency? Probably not.”

But Hall of Crowe is more optimistic.

“People are getting into a lot of investments centered around the Inflation Reduction Act,” he said. “I see it moving capital into green-energy investments.”

However, Barkow cautions it’s too early to declare the IRA a climate-change buster.

“There is no data yet to say it will drive this kind of behavior,” she said. “It will be interesting to see ... how many actually purchased a clean vehicle and were able to take advantage of the tax credits.” ■



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The Artspace Uptown Artist Lofts revived the Warren Building in Michigan City.

Photo by Peter Ringenberg for Tonn and Blank Construction

A rendering of downtown Michigan City shows the plans for the 11th Street Station with parking structure, residential tower and commercial space.

Illustration provided by the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority

Downtown dreamin'

PLANS FOR REDEVELOPMENT CALL FOR WALKABLE, MULTI-USE SPACES AS DOUBLE-TRACK PROJECT'S IMPACT TAKES SHAPE

MICHAEL PUENTE

From downtown Hammond to Michigan City, Northwest Indiana is certainly seeing a boom in development and construction.

The seeds that are being planted now could have a tremendous impact on how the Region looks in the next decade or two — especially in downtown areas of

“The double track is a game-changer that will make us become a suburb of Chicago in the future,” said Clarence Hulse, executive director of the Michigan City Economic Development Corp.

Hulse said the goal is to appeal to visitors from Chicago or Southeast Michigan who might one day want to live in Michigan City.

The possibilities are attracting companies that want to be part of the boom.

“We’re seeing a positive business climate all throughout Northwest Indiana, which is why we’re looking to expand our footprint,” says Gregory Monberg, director of architecture and a trustee on the board of directors for Wightman, a full-service consulting firm serving Southwest Michigan and Northern Indiana.

“The big drivers of the changing downtowns in Northwest Indiana are the double-track and the Westlake projects. These projects are going to be extremely transformative.”

— Sherri Ziller,
NWI Regional Development Authority



cities and towns that had been on the decline for decades.

The Double Track Northwest Indiana project is a big driver of those changes.

will reduce travel times from Northwest Indiana to downtown Chicago.

It’s one of the largest economic development projects in the history of Indiana.

Many Northwest Indiana towns are poised to benefit from the almost \$1 billion Double Track Northwest Indiana project, which will add a second rail line along a 17-mile stretch between Michigan City and Gary. The project

Just a short walk

Wightman has a history of assisting communities in developing and enhancing their downtown areas. For example, the firm developed the master plan for Cassopolis, Michigan, just north of South Bend.

“We developed a whole series of projects for them, partly business, party recreational and partly through government,” Monberg said. The project included a new town hall and police station.

The company also promotes walkable communities, which the National



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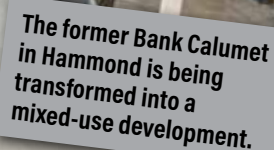
The Porter County Courthouse underwent a multi-million makeover that finished in 2020.

Photo provided by Shive-Hattery



The century-old La Porte County Courthouse was remodeled in Michigan City.

Photo by Dana Leek / Mirage Studio LLC for Tonn and Blank Construction



The former Bank Calumet in Hammond is being transformed into a mixed-use development.

Photo provided by Northwest Indiana RDA

Association of Realtors report are popular with Americans who said the design style fosters a better quality of life.

“We also redeveloped their main streetscape and made it more walkable, more friendly and more business friendly,” Monberg said. “We did everything from improving parking and access to creating bike lanes to creating outdoor seating areas that really enhance the downtown appearance.”

Wightman has worked on several projects with Horizon Bank, Indiana Michigan Power Co. and NIPSCO. It also has clients in education, including Bishop Noll Institute in Hammond and Charter School of the Dunes in Gary.

Monberg says Wightman engages with the Congress for the New Urbanism, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., when working with communities.

The CNU champions walkable urbanism while providing resources, education and technical assistance to create what it calls “people-centered places” that are “socially just, economically robust and environmentally resilient.”

The organization has a mission to advance three key goals: diversifying neighborhoods, designing for climate change and making places more walkable.

“Those principles are very much focused on things like walkability of a downtown,” Monberg said. “Mixing uses so that they’re not zoned as a single use where you can have both retail, living space and governmental services all within the same walkable area.”

Although not projects of Wightman, Monberg says he sees the influence of the CNU in the redevelopment of the downtown areas of Hammond and Michigan City. The CNU noted on its website that Hammond’s downtown master plan “could reposition the city for the future.”

“I’m really encouraged by things like street improvements and improved parking, while building three new train stations to increase urban density in those areas and having mixed use within walkable distances of those train stations,” said Monberg, who is a native of Hammond but now lives in Michigan City.

Residential goals

No one is more excited about the future of Michigan City than Hulse.

“Our role is to market the city, advocate for being business-friendly to make

ARCHITECTURE/DESIGN

sure people know what's happening within the city and also kind of being the evangelism ambassadors on the city's behalf," Hulse said.

Work to make downtown Michigan City more appealing has been an ongoing effort for more than a decade, Hulse said.

"I always tell people that it didn't start last year," Hulse said. "It's been probably a good 10 to 15 years of slowly plugging forward."

There's also the \$80 million project to build 200 upscale apartments in a 12-story residential tower built over a new central train station and parking garage downtown. The project's working title is "11th Street Central."

And there's also plans for two new hotels and 150 condos on the waterfront.

"We're currently looking at roughly about a thousand apartment units in the next five years in downtown, which

Investment realities

Just as Hulse has high hopes for Michigan City, so does Sherri Ziller for the entire Region. As president and CEO of the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority, she is tasked with implementing a strategic growth plan that positions the RDA as leader of regional development.

In 2016, the RDA pushed the state of Indiana to invest in the rail projects in Northwest Indiana to spur economic development.

"We demonstrated to the legislature that those rail projects would bring an estimated \$2.7 billion in development over the next 20 years," Ziller said. "They liked the \$2.7 billion part, but they wanted to speed up the pace of that return on investment."

Last year, the RDA created seven Transit Development Districts: Munster/Dyer Main Street boundary; Munster Ridge Road boundary; the Hammond Gateway Downtown boundary; the East Chicago boundary; the Gary Miller boundary; the Portage/Ogden Dunes boundary; and the Michigan City boundary.

"What those districts are designed to do is to incentivize and promote development around our existing and new South Shore stations," Ziller said. "The big drivers of the changing downtowns in Northwest Indiana are the double-track and the Westlake projects. These projects are going to be extremely transformative."

Ziller said that between Michigan City and Hammond alone, up to \$400 million of the RDA's original \$2.7 billion in development is earmarked for projects.

In fact, Ziller said, so many projects have been proposed that the communities have the luxury of picking and choosing what they want.

"They are turning away the development that they don't want to see," Ziller said. "So now, they are able to get that quality, high-level development, whatever that may be—it's different for all of our communities."

Ziller said each community has its own distinctive ideas.

"What Hammond wants is going to be a lot different from what Portage may want," Ziller said. "They all have something different to offer."



Photo by David Knight Photography / For Wightman

Wightman developed the master plan for Cassopolis, Michigan, just north of South Bend. The project included a new town hall and police station. Wightman has worked on several projects with Horizon Bank, Indiana Michigan Power Co. and NIPSCO.

Hulse said the city tries to encourage more people to come downtown through its Uptown Arts District.

"People who are more artist friendly want to see more artists downtown. So, you'll see a lot of the facade designed for art. You'll see paintings on the walls. We have a lot of art studios downtown. That's what has been our base, the artists," Hulse said. "With that, we've been able to attract over 20 new restaurants in the past seven years."

But now, the goal is to attract more people to live in downtown Michigan City.

That's where the double-track project comes in and is so important in realizing new downtowns in Hammond and Michigan City.

Of the \$650 million in federal money coming to Northwest Indiana for the project, about \$125 million will be spent in Michigan City alone, Hulse said.

"We have leveraged that to bring an additional billion dollars in the pipeline of development in the future," Hulse said.

has been kind of the missing part of having a complete downtown," Hulse said. "We've had restaurants, an art district, and we're trying to increase the number of residents who will live, work and play in the downtown."

Several other projects in the next decade will continue to drive development in Michigan City. Hulse predicts the city could attract up to 10,000 new residents in the next decade.

"These are exciting times in Michigan City for the future development," Hulse said. "There's never been a (better) time to be in Michigan City."

The Vibrant Michigan City initiative offers a playbook for growth. The city partnered with the Brookings Institute and Local Initiative Support Services to develop the guide for equitable development.

"We encourage investors, people who want to move to Michigan City, companies, because we want to see them be part of something both transformational and a model for future development," Hulse said.

But, she said, it's important for the RDA to be "part of the conversation."

"One of the RDA's main goals is that return on investment," she said. "When we're looking at these deals, we want to make sure that our communities are aware of the overall goal we have for Northwest Indiana."

That goal means benefits for more than just the Region.

"We want to make sure that we're implementing our best practices and procedures to make sure that it's a success for everyone involved: our communities, Northwest Indiana, the state of Indiana," she said.

Mixing old with new

Turning a project from idea to reality is a process familiar to Michigan City-based Tonn and Blank Construction. The firm has been doing business since 1922.

The company's projects can be seen all throughout Northwest Indiana, from industrial, commercial and higher education to municipalities and even religious institutions.

The firm remodeled the century-old La Porte County Courthouse in Michigan City and revitalized a building that is now home to the Artspace Uptown Artist Lofts in Michigan City.

Jon Gilmore, president and CEO, says remodeling an older building can be tricky.

"It's blending the old with the new," he said. "The design needs to blend in."

He said the courthouse project included an addition that almost doubled its size.

"We did it in such a way that you now have a modern facility with all the technology, but it still fits in," Gilmore said. "It doesn't look like a spaceship that landed next to an old building."

The Porter County Courthouse is another example of a building that was showing its age. At 135 years old, the building underwent a multi-million makeover that finished in 2020. And the former Bank Calumet in Hammond is being transformed into a mixed-use development.

But, Gilmore said, sometimes a proposed project just isn't feasible.

"We pride ourselves on putting the project first and the owner first,"

Gilmore said. "And even if the project dies because of the cost or the complexity, we're just honest with the customers up front and tell them exactly the way it is and how it's going to work. We've been very successful in doing that."

Gilmore is pragmatic about the future of Northwest Indiana with the double-track project.

"I would say it will be five to 10 years before we see major changes," Gilmore

said. "The tracks need to get put in, then we'll start to see the landscape change with that. It's not going to be next year."

But Gilmore agrees that the double-track project for his hometown of Michigan City is "a game-changer."

"I don't know how it can't be?" he said. "It's a game-changer especially for Michigan City because the city has lagged behind a bit, and this is going to catch them up real quick." ■

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UNDER CONSTRUCTION



Downtown Hammond is a sea of orange cones as major construction projects are underway. Hohman Avenue is being converted to two lanes to slow vehicular traffic and make downtown more pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly.

WITH HELP OF MASTER PLAN, TRAIN STATION, HAMMOND POISED TO MEET AMBITIOUS GOAL OF 90,000 RESIDENTS BY 2030

DOUG ROSS

Bringing more people to downtown Hammond is the focus of an aggressive master plan already underway.

“We would like to see a thriving city with a very vibrant downtown core,” said Anne Anderson, executive director

of the city’s department of planning and development.

The city developed a master plan for downtown in 2019. In the report, Mayor Thomas McDermott Jr. said, “downtown Hammond has ‘good bones’ with its historic architecture giving our city a unique feel.”

Since then, McDermott fought to get a downtown train station as part of the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District’s South Shore Line expansion.

“Hammond was late to the table,” McDermott said. Other communities already had agreed on the West Lake

\$107,500

Median value of owner-occupied housing units, July 2017-2021

\$48,107

Estimated median household income, 2017-2021



Photo by Doug Ross

Corridor Project to extend passenger train service to Dyer.

Hammond held out for the gateway station connecting the existing east-west route and the new north-south route. Originally, plans called for placing that station in Chicago's Hegewisch neighborhood.

The plan now calls for a gateway station just east of the federal courthouse in downtown Hammond and a south Hammond station at 173rd Street

to serve Purdue University Northwest and the surrounding area.

Work on the stations will begin in 2026, once the trains begin running on the new tracks.

"In fact, they're already pretty much designed," McDermott said.

The new gateway station will include an elevator to get to the elevated tracks, which will give downtown Hammond a "very urban feel," Anderson said.

Other projects make the downtown appear like it is under construction.

"We are a city of orange cones right now, but it's leading to great things," Anderson said.

Hohman Avenue, the main north-south route, is being reconfigured to make downtown more pedestrian-friendly, going from four lanes to two.

Before construction began, cars would zip along at 50 mph or more, McDermott said. The new configuration calls for one lane in each direction and parking in the middle to cut the speed in half. The goal is to encourage drivers to stop and explore downtown.

Living downtown

Anderson said the city is embracing the "magical idea" of living downtown. Strack & Van Til already operates a downtown grocery that would serve the hundreds of residents expected to live in units already under construction.

By 2030, McDermott predicts, there will be 500 to 1,000 people permanently living in downtown Hammond. "I think that's an attainable situation," he said.

That could help the city achieve a goal of 90,000 residents in the 2030 census. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 76,575 people were estimated to live in Hammond as of July 1, 2022.

McDermott said gaining residents could mean much more for the city.

"How much different will Hammond be to investors?" he posed.

The city has gradually lost about 7,000 residents since 1990.

Downtown Hammond was once where a lot of the city's jobs were. Then shopping malls came along and drained that lifeblood from downtown Hammond, along with many other downtowns across the nation, said Brian Poland, director of city planning.

"Now we're sort of shifting back to where jobs and people are," McDermott said.

No one understands living downtown quite like Raymundo Garcia. He thinks of himself as the only "permanent resident" living downtown.

Garcia is on a mission to help revitalize the area.

"People associate their town with their downtown," he said.

Garcia owns El Taco Real, which has been on the city's north side for 50 years.

Along with former Police Chief Brian Miller, Garcia is a strong proponent of the "broken windows" theory that blight begets further blight.

"I used to paint over graffiti, people's houses that weren't even mine," he said. "It really works."

Then he began buying houses near his restaurant, fixing them up and renting them out, often

to his employees. At one time, Garcia owned 14 houses within one block of El Taco Real.

Investing in downtown

Garcia is tired of people saying, "Somebody shoulda, woulda," he said.

The city began buying properties downtown. Garcia didn't believe the city should own that much property and began his own investment campaign.

His first purchase downtown was the Jupiter building, which some people know as the Kresge building.



"Downtown Hammond has 'good bones' with its historic architecture giving our city a unique feel."

— Mayor Thomas McDermott Jr.

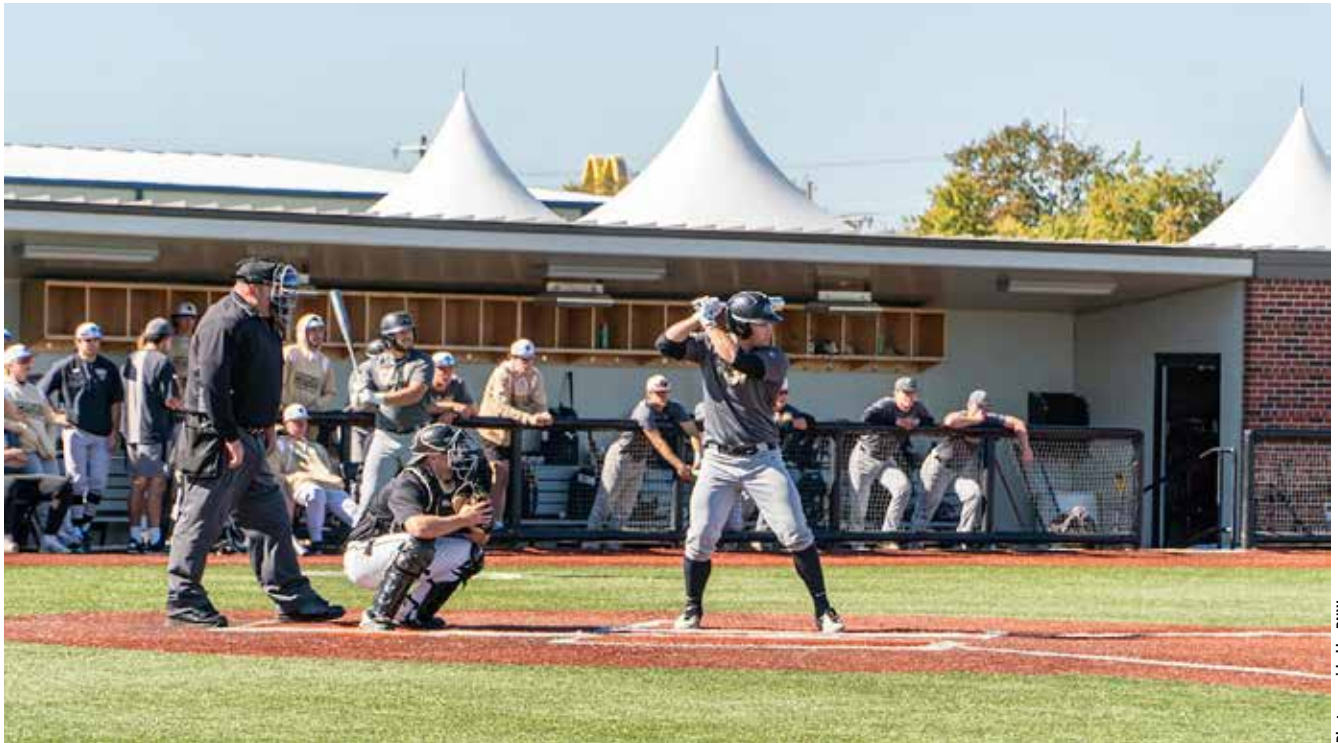


Photo provided by PNW

Dowling Park near Purdue University Northwest's Hammond campus is leased from the city nine months a year for PNW athletic teams. The outdoor athletics complex includes all-weather synthetic fields for baseball, softball and soccer.

Garcia's answer for the empty building was a restaurant/banquet hall called EAT. "With EAT, we proved that people will come to downtown Hammond," he said. "People with money will come to downtown Hammond and go home."

He has purchased four buildings and two empty lots downtown. "That's a good investment, and I'm investing in my town," he said.

The self-avowed capitalist said he also has a moral imperative to improve his community.

"What capitalists have got to understand is it's not just about profit," he said.

Garcia stood on the corner, across from his home, and surveyed the downtown.

The Jefferson Hotel "was an eyesore and a place for nefarious behaviors," he said. That's no more. The LaSalle Hotel, once a flophouse, has been shut down.

New windows have been installed at the Bank Calumet building, which will offer 100 residential units once work is completed.

"When all this happens, I'll be at the head of the table," he said. "I've been working on this 10 years. I'm more than happy to wait."

It's cathedral building, Garcia explained. It's investing in the

downtown with the expectation that the payoff could be years away but worth the cost now.

"Hammond has some wonderful possibilities," Purdue University Northwest Chancellor Thomas Keon said, but changes take years, not months.

Keon grew up in the Boston area, which had to reinvent itself when the textile industry fled south for cheaper labor costs. The result was a boom in high-tech industries.

Hammond could be the first city in Indiana to leverage the high-speed internet backbone that runs through it. "If that could happen, we would see a brand-new city," Keon said.

Applying lessons elsewhere

Consultant Jeff Speck, who specializes in improving streetscapes to enhance walkability, provided a detailed plan for downtown Hammond. Those principles are being applied elsewhere as well.

"What we learned from Jeff Speck downtown, we're basically applying that to Kennedy Avenue," Poland said. Slower traffic opens the opportunity to explore businesses nearby.

The basic idea behind economic development is that public spending spurs

private investment.

"You've got to have something that in essence seeds the effort," Poland said.

Investing in streets and other infrastructure hopefully encourages businesses to invest in the area.

"Hopefully it changes the whole makeup of the area," he said.

From the beginning, Hammond has invested money from Horseshoe Casino in major infrastructure projects. North of 129th Street, the Port Authority is responsible for the city's parks. That's because of a deal that uses a portion of the admission tax from Horseshoe to pay for parks on the city's north side, McDermott explained.

South of there, investment in parks continues, said Parks Administrator Jim Taillon. In addition to improvements at neighborhood parks, the city built the Hammond Sportsplex & Community Center at the site of the former Woodmar Mall. It's generating more than \$1 million in revenue each year.

For summer, there is a sand volleyball court and other recreation facilities available outside.

"We've tried to do some things in the summertime that we can do out there," Taillon said.

Nearby, “the YMCA is going up really fast. We’re really excited that’s coming up.” The YMCA will be one of the largest in the nation.

Officials broke ground on the \$70 million, 120,000-square-foot facility April 28 next to the Hammond Sportsplex. It is expected to be complete by the end of 2024.

“That is an excellent opportunity for the city of Hammond,” Poland said.

The YMCA and sportsplex are bringing a different demographic to that area, which should prompt restaurants, retail and other businesses to pop up nearby.

Finland-based Huhtamaki, which makes products like fiber drink carriers and egg filler trays, is expanding its manufacturing operation there, too. It plans to spend almost \$100 million on a 250,000-square-foot facility.

“There’s so much money being invested in that intersection, that corridor,” Poland said. “That, to me, is like a big spark. It keeps on going and going.”

On the other side of town, Park 24 Marble Street Development is investing

\$35 million into a 400-square-foot spec building on a former brownfield site. It should be complete by late 2024.

“The demand for this type of development is high and will give any business that locates there a competitive advantage,” McDermott said in a press release. “Our economic development team fields calls often for businesses looking to relocate in Hammond and now we can direct them to space that is immediately available.”

Purdue University Northwest

Another major economic powerhouse in Hammond is Purdue University Northwest, which sits on 170 acres between 169th and 173rd streets. It also has four buildings in a row at the intersection of Indianapolis Boulevard and 171st Street.

An economic impact analysis for PNW shows the university supports 1 in 36 jobs in Northwest Indiana.

As chancellor, Keon is among One Region’s leaders. The nonprofit’s mission is to grow the population, talent and

household income of Northwest Indiana. During a One Region discussion, walkable cities came up. Now Hammond is putting those principles into play.

“We’re seeing change,” he said, with properties downtown under development. “The train station will have immense value over time,” Keon said.

At its Hammond campus, PNW has close ties with the city. Athletic fields owned by the city are leased to PNW for nine months a year for activities like soccer, baseball, softball and tennis.

Housing

Water, which Northwest Indiana has plenty of, is seen as the new oil — a very valuable commodity. Hammond, which has its own water utility, has sold water to other communities, providing a profit that is reinvested in Hammond, said Matt Wells, associate vice chancellor for external engagement and development at PNW and acting president and CEO of One Region.

“Hammond has really leveraged how to use water as an income flow,” Keon said.

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THE FUTURE OF HAMMOND



Photo by Doug Ross

The Bank Calumet building sports new windows as construction is under-way to provide about one-quarter of the 400 new residential units being developed in downtown Hammond.

Hammond also has learned how to encourage home ownership and higher education. Its College Bound scholarship program is partially funded with revenues from water sales, Keon said.

That program was launched with the aim of boosting home ownership, educational attainment levels and a dream of college graduates returning to Hammond.

"It definitely has spurred home ownership in Hammond," Anderson said.

The Home Bound program, launched at the same time, offers up to \$10,000 in down payment assistance for first-time homebuyers.

Together, the programs are "wonderful, far beyond our expectations," Anderson said.

"Our housing stock is an older housing stock," she said. "We have a lot of beautiful houses from the 1920s and 1930s," she said, along with smaller houses built in the 1940s.

The city faces a shortage of new single-family homes.

"A handful of years ago, we really started focusing on underdeveloped parcels," she said.

Improving public safety

Hammond made the news in August when McDermott persuaded the City Council to vote, 5-4, to require gas stations to shut down between midnight and 5 a.m.

"It was harder than I thought it would be," McDermott said. "We're anticipating litigation on it."

But too much crime was happening during those hours, he said.

Garcia agrees with the move.

"I think I would have given gas station owners more of an opportunity to comply with restrictions," he said, but something had to be done.

Hammond's crime rate has been steadily decreasing for the past few decades, according to CityRating.com, but it is still higher than the national average.

Hammond was one of the first in Northwest Indiana to install license plate readers, McDermott said. "We blanketed the city."

The city first secured its perimeter, then added fixed locations in the city, mobile units and more.

"We're really aggressive with our license plate reader data," McDermott said. "They help the police department be proactive instead of reactive."

Ready for change

Those efforts at public safety won't go unnoticed as the city of Hammond continues to develop.

By expanding passenger rail service, Northwest Indiana becomes a viable alternative to suburbs in Illinois.

U.S. Census Bureau estimates show that Illinois residents are moving to Indiana. The report estimated that 37,764 people moved from Illinois to Indiana in 2021.

Other incentives will help attract business too.

The transit development district around the new train station downtown gives Hammond more leverage than a traditional TIF district. The TDD also allows the city to capture the additional income tax revenue in the district to provide further money to help pay for infrastructure and other economic development needs.

The city also received a \$7 million Federal Railroad Administration grant to build a new overpass in the southeast area. The project will help ease traffic where local roads meet railroad tracks. The project is expected to start in 2024.



RAYMUNDO GARCIA

OWNER, EL TACO REAL AND EAT

Visitors and new residents will come to downtown if they have a good reason.



ANNE ANDERSON

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

City will thrive with a "very vibrant downtown core."



THOMAS KEON

CHANCELLOR, PURDUE
UNIVERSITY NORTHWEST

Hammond could become a hub for high-speed internet.



JIM TAILLON

PARKS ADMINISTRATOR

Sportsplex and YMCA under construction are exciting opportunities for residents.



MATT WELLS

ASSOCIATE VICE
CHANCELLOR, PNW

City's water utility turns a profit as other communities use it too.

"Railroad stoppages in Hammond have been a problem in our city for over a century, and we are finally getting the opportunity to fix it once and for all," said McDermott in a press release.

Other efforts focus on cleaning up old wounds.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency added the Federated Metals Corp. Whiting site to its Superfund National Priorities List.

The company filed for bankruptcy before EPA-required cleanup was completed at the former metal smelting, refining, recovery and recycling facility in Hammond along the shore of Lake George.

Operations at the site ceased in 1983, but various smelting activities continued. The site was referred to the EPA's Superfund removal program in 2016.

"By cleaning up this site, EPA can support residents to help create healthy, thriving communities," said EPA Regional Administrator Debra Shore in a press release.



Photo provided by Anne Anderson

Construction is underway for an elevated rail line in downtown Hammond, giving the passenger rail hub more of an urban vibe. Riders will use an elevator to access it.

And then there's City Hall.

McDermott remembers when Hammond considered moving City Hall downtown about 10 years ago to help anchor that area's development. But that plan fizzled for lack of an identifiable funding source and an outcry from neighbors of the existing building.

"It's a nice building," he said. "I personally love City Hall."

Improvements to energy efficiency and other work there has made City Hall a better place to work.

McDermott understands people like Garcia who want to keep it downtown.

"If there was ever a reason to put City Hall in downtown Hammond, it's because of what's happening downtown" with the new train station and other transformational improvements, McDermott said.

Anderson agrees that there's a new attitude around the city.

"Our master plan and the train are really changing everyone's perspective," she said. ■

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LEADER PROFILE

Good bones



Entrepreneur blends chocolate with love of dinosaurs for new museum

STEVE ZALUSKY

If Mark Turner's life story were turned into a movie, the result might be a combination of "It's a Wonderful Life" and "Jurassic Park," with a touch of "Knute Rockne All-American" mixed in.

Turner is president of the South Bend Chocolate Co. and is a loyal Hoosier with a passion for paleontology. But he also sees a lot of George Bailey in himself — especially since the South Bend community is helping him realize his dream of a dinosaur museum when he thought the project faced extinction.

The South Bend Common Council committed \$2.7 million, and Turner committed \$15 million of his own money to build the Indiana Dinosaur Museum. It also will include a new chocolate production plant, a South Bend Chocolate Co. Museum, and restaurant on an 88-acre site at the southwest corner of U.S. 31 and U.S. 20 west of the South Bend International Airport.

The museum project has good bones — it will contain fossils Turner has collected over the years.

"Anyone that looks at this project can truly say it's one of a kind," said South Bend Mayor James Mueller, who believes it will "bring people here and capture visitors that are passing by."

"He is an entrepreneur and in many ways a pioneer," Mueller said of Turner. "He is a businessman, but he is also a good community member who wants to go beyond just selling products."

Turner's passion for both chocolate and collecting is a legacy passed down from his father, Don. He ran the Sugar 'N Spice Chocolate Factory but "was always poking around, hunting for arrowheads."

Turner is also by nature a collector.

"I'm the guy who walks on the beach and has to collect every shell," he said.

After graduating from Eastern Illinois University, he began working in his father's candy company.

"I wanted to do everything else but the business," he said.

But with a master's degree in European history, "there weren't many jobs," he said. "So, I went into making candy."

He started the South Bend Chocolate Co. in 1991 and gained national prominence by entering into a licensing agreement with Notre Dame University.

The company produces such Notre Dame-themed products as the Domer, a chocolate truffle honoring students and alumni; the Rockne, a confection that might please the Gipper himself, a mound of premium American chocolate blended with coconut, almonds and a cherry flavoring; and Nuts for ND, which combines chocolates with cashews, almonds, pecans and filberts.

The company's 60,000-square-foot factory at 3300 W. Sample St. in South Bend produces more than 500 different chocolates and sweets, which are sold in 11 company-owned stores in Northern Indiana and four franchise locations throughout Indiana, Michigan and Ohio.

Turner certainly puts his money where his mouth is — he eats about a quarter pound of chocolate every day.

His pursuit of fossils, he said, is not an academic one — it is a passion that stems from his entrepreneurial spirit.

"Entrepreneurs," he said, "don't follow the same paths and the same routines as other people."

He does most of his digging in Montana in a high-plains desert area that is subject to erosion, exposing remnants from such periods as the Cretaceous, when dinosaurs lived. Turner said he has turned up such finds as what appears to be a new species of sauropod, which were characterized by long necks, long tails and bodies weighing up to 100 tons.

"The skull doesn't look like any other long neck," Turner said.

Peter Larson, president of the Black Hills Institute of Geological Research, is optimistic about Turner's find. "Where he's digging is a place that really hasn't been looked at very much, and so the chances of it being new are pretty good," he said.

His organization works with museums all over the world and has its own museum in Hill City, South Dakota.

"We always called him the 'chocolate man' because of his business," Larson said.

The museum project should be complete by March. Among the wonders will be the skeletons of 40-million-year-old dinosaurs. The combination of dinosaurs and chocolate will add up to a natural roadside attraction, Turner said.

The project almost didn't get off the ground. In 2017, the South Bend Redevelopment Commission gave Turner the land, while South Bend invested \$1.4 million for infrastructure improvements, which Mueller said will benefit other developments.

But the pandemic shutdown sent his company's sales plummeting by 97 percent. As a result, he had to use money for the museum to keep his company afloat. Meanwhile, construction costs soared 30 to 40 percent. Fortunately, the federal government stepped in with about \$1.76 million in forgivable Paycheck Protection Program loans, while South Bend's Common Council approved \$2.7 million to build the museum and factory.

For Turner, it's truly a wonderful life in South Bend. "When George Bailey had trouble, people came to help him. And I feel like that happened to me," he said. ■



"I think chocolate is irresistible to mom. And dinosaurs are irresistible to the kids. So, dad's going to have to pull over and suffer through it."

— Mark Turner
South Bend Chocolate Co.

BUSINESS PROFILE

Salty therapy



Evexia owner so impressed with halotherapy that she opened her own cave

PATRICIA SZPEKOWSKI

Evexia comes from the Greek word meaning “wellness” — a perfect description for Kimberly Franklin’s Evexia Salt Cave & Spa.

Franklin’s journey began with a salt therapy session while visiting a friend in 2018. She hadn’t planned it.

Franklin experienced surprising and positive health benefits during that singular hour.

In fact, it changed her life. Within two years in 2020, she took the plunge and opened her own halotherapy, or salt therapy business, Evexia Salt Cave & Spa in Chesterton.

“I had an hour to kill before meeting a friend,” Franklin said. “There was a salt cave near her home in Naperville, Illinois, so I thought I would give it a try. I had a sinus infection at the time and could not believe the effect I received from my session. It had opened my sinus cavity as if I turned on a faucet.”

When she returned home, Franklin sought to continue halotherapy sessions because of her positive experience and how it impacted her personal health.

“There weren’t any salt caves in the area,” she said. “I was so intrigued that I started going to any salt cave I could find and found a new healing ailment each time.”

This type of “ancient” salt therapy has been common in Eastern Europe since the 12th century.

Franklin dug deep and researched the therapy protocols of spa-like salt caves, which involve a special generator that uses a pharmaceutical-grade salt to disperse into the cave as a mist. It improves breathing and helps with other skin conditions, sinuses and allergies.

It did not take long for her to open her own salt cave spa. The soothing aura at Evexia showcases dimly lit lights that glow across pink salt walls and a ceiling that mimics a star-studded sky.

Evexia offers other complementary therapeutic services, such as ionic foot detox, infrared sauna, yoga classes,

facials, massages, electrolysis and sound therapy.

The process of starting the business seemed to fall in place quickly. Financing came from personal and Small Business Administration loans.

Then she said she found the “perfect location” at 1582 S. Calumet Road where they started the salt cave in the 1,500 square feet. There she had a 440-square-foot manmade cave built to accommodate 22,000 pounds of imported pink Himalayan salt.

“Well, we all know what happened in 2020, but it was just amazing,” she said. “My business took off like crazy. We were very busy and spent a lot of time continuously sanitizing everything for everyone’s health and safety.”

In 2022, Evexia expanded with an additional 1,500 square feet for a spa.

“It was great to have a blank slate,” she said, “to create an inviting atmosphere for the spa, offering massages, facials,

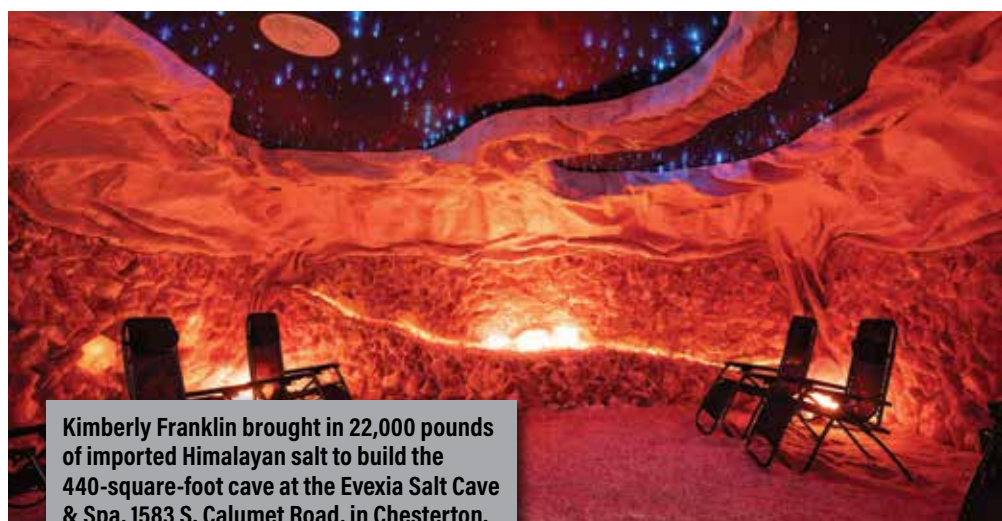
Franklin’s brother-in-law David Lawson handles Evexia’s marketing efforts. She says that Lawson is an asset to the business as “he’s personable, engaging and knowledgeable.”

Getting involved in the community was important for Franklin. They are members of three local chambers of commerce: Duneland, Michigan City and Valparaiso. Lawson believes in cross promoting with local area gyms and other businesses that have a health focus.

“It’s all about building relationships and partnerships,” Franklin said.

Rich Shields, chief development and marketing officer for the United Way Northwest Indiana, found his visit to Evexia Salt Cave & Spa to be just what he needed.

“I thoroughly enjoyed it and found it to be tranquil, relaxing and peaceful,” he said. “I could really feel my lungs and nasal



Kimberly Franklin brought in 22,000 pounds of imported Himalayan salt to build the 440-square-foot cave at the Evexia Salt Cave & Spa, 1583 S. Calumet Road, in Chesterton.

Provided by Evexia

dermaplaning, microdermabrasion, electrolysis, Reiki, healing touch nurturing energy therapy, and a full-spectrum infrared sauna.”

Today, the business has several full-time and part-time employees, including massage therapists, aestheticians and yoga instructors who are accredited, licensed and bonded independent contractors.

passages clearing. With all of the poor air quality we are experiencing, I highly recommend a visit to Evexia.”

Businesses can take advantage of a three- to four-hour “employee wellness day” at Evexia. Services include a catered lunch, time in the salt cave, an ionic foot detox session, and a soothing mini facial and mini massage. ■

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Pet people



Humane Indiana expands into Merrillville, hires more help for wildlife program, keeps animals at heart



Humane Indiana volunteer Tony Lipka adopted Floyd as his first rescue.

Photos provided by Humane Indiana



Dr. Lisa Schneider cares for Matilda at the Humane Indiana Veterinary Clinic.

JESSICA TOBACMAN

For Humane Indiana CEO Brian Fitzpatrick, pets that are in danger usually point to a problem with their owners.

“Where we see animals in trouble, we see people in trouble,” Fitzpatrick said.

Tony Lipka, an artist who lives in Hammond, has adopted or rescued 11 animals from shelters.

“Every single dog I saved had a sad backstory, and I wanted them all to know that there are people who will take them away from anything that hurt them in their past,” Lipka said via email.

Volunteers like Lipka are what the organization needs most. He has volunteered there for 11 years.

“We are in urgent need of families to foster pets and help domestic violence victims,” said Rachel Hurst, grants and donor relations specialist for Humane Indiana.

The nonprofit based in Munster also serves Gary, Hammond and East

Chicago. But to address the need in the community, the animal protection organization expanded its service area into Merrillville. The Estelle Marcus Animal Clinic now serves low-income people from all over.

It also has hired more help for its Wildlife Rehabilitation & Education Center in east Valparaiso. Dr. Kristy Yu was appointed clinic associate veterinarian. And Dr. Lisa Schneider was promoted to medical director.

The clinic spays, neuters, vaccinates and microchips pets at a lower cost than a veterinarian would generally charge.

Veterinary care is very expensive, Fitzpatrick said. “We do everything we can to keep animals out of the

shelter,” he said. “We want to keep pets with (their) families. I tend to focus on the positive, such as uniting pets with future families.”

About 3,000 animals come through the shelter and clinic every year.



“Where we see animals in trouble, we see people in trouble.”

— Brian Fitzpatrick
Humane Indiana

As families lost housing during the pandemic and after, or lost their jobs, the number of families who want to adopt has not kept up with the number of stray animals coming to Humane Indiana.

With an ever-expanding crisis foster program, Humane Indiana connects animals with families in a foster network.

“We want to have a nurturing connection in the community, with animals, people and the environment,” Hurst said.

The organization even has an incubator for neonatal animals, whose immune systems are not yet developed enough for them to be among the older animals in the shelter.

Because of this immune system issue, neonatal kittens need to be fostered. Humane Indiana provides food, on-site veterinarians and materials such as collars to help with this process.

“We offer training to foster and a coach to help do that,” Hurst said. “Now is a great time to adopt.”

Training occurs online or on the phone, and families indicate which animal(s) they would like to care for.

For those who would like to volunteer, opportunities include helping at events with crowd control and parking; walking



Phoenix, a red-tailed hawk, is an ambassador animal in Humane Indiana Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Center's care in Valparaiso.

dogs or answering phones at the shelter; helping to clean up or maintain the organization's gardens and yards; cleaning and staining lumber comprising the gazebo; and preparing merchandise such as gift baskets at the resale center.

Humane Indiana changed its name from Humane Society Calumet Area seven years ago. They are unaffiliated with the national Humane Society but do work with them on various projects, including events.

To help Humane Indiana's mission to keep families together, they have a resale

HUMANE INDIANA

► To volunteer or drop off a pet, call Humane Indiana first at (219) 922-3811, ext. 212.

and consignment shop in Highland. Donations help local businesses that sell products, including honey, jams, jelly and coffee. For

fundraising, Humane Indiana depends on individual donors and community businesses sponsoring programs or events, employee giving programs, fundraisers and event donations.

Humane Indiana's staff educate about 15,000 people each year, with events, camps and a "reversed field trip model," by taking ambassador animals like owls or a fox to schools or libraries.

"How do we teach to be better stewards of the environment? We can all coexist," Fitzpatrick said. ■



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NEIL SAMAHON

An untapped labor solution is often overlooked in our country.

At Opportunity Enterprises, our mission is to create inclusive and equitable opportunities for individuals of all abilities. We offer extensive services for those with intellectual or physical disabilities. Notably, our vocational services and advocacy promote an inclusive workforce, aligning with the needs of many businesses today.



► **Neil Samahon** has been president and CEO of Opportunity Enterprises in Northwest Indiana since 2019. The nonprofit serves individuals with intellectual disabilities.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention states that 1 in 5 working-age individuals in the U.S., or 53 million people, has a disability. However, their unemployment rate is almost double the general population's. Of those individuals with an intellectual or developmental disability, 81% are unemployed. With

employers struggling to fill positions, it's vital to reevaluate hiring strategies.

An inclusive workforce is not just a matter of compassion or moral obligation, nor should the employment of individuals with disabilities be seen as an act of philanthropy. It is about embracing the unique perspectives and talents that every individual brings to the team.

When thinking about individuals with disabilities, one shouldn't focus on limitations. What if the focus is shifted from disabilities to abilities? This is not just about empathy but about empowerment, about creating opportunities that allow individuals to reach their

potential, and most importantly, about embracing uniqueness.

Hiring anyone depends on how a prospective employee can add value to the organization. Employees with disabilities have proven to be a motivated, dedicated and hard-working group of individuals who can positively impact the bottom line.

Another benefit to having an inclusive workforce is how it contributes to the culture of an organization. It can be an attractive quality to prospective employees who are looking to join companies who value diversity and can be an appealing component of an organization's brand.

Numerous studies highlight the advantages of inclusive workplaces and hiring those with disabilities. The Institute for Corporate Productivity's 2019 report, "The Inclusive Talent Pool," discusses companies' practices in employing diverse abilities. For instance, in 2015, an Amazon sorting center in Washington employed workers with an IDD in various roles. Those employees met the same expectations as other staff. After a year, their productivity was 98% of the average, their work quality was 37% better, and they had superior attendance. Moreover, they maintained a flawless safety record against a 1.1% warehouse incident rate.

Embracing the notion of an inclusive workforce is about opening up to diversity, not only in terms of race, gender or religion but also in terms of abilities. It is about recognizing that talent and innovation know no boundaries.

Often there is a perception that the challenges and need for resources are greater than what they actually are. Also, in the report from i4CP, the

companies surveyed reported that they experienced minimal actual issues in contrast to preconceived concerns about the challenges of hiring employees with IDD. Also noting that there are supportive resources for successful placements — such as job profile analysis to determine fit, job coaching (onboarding/initial training support) and training for leaders and coworkers.

Opportunity Enterprises' corporate inclusivity consulting division works with companies to better prepare them to successfully hire, onboard and prepare their new employees. The path to an inclusive workforce requires thoughtfulness and some execution, but the rewards are immense.

Andrew Nunan, senior operations manager for ERI, the nation's largest electronic recycling company, which has a facility in Plainfield, said the program

changed the way its management team leads its employees.

"The CIC program opened our eyes to an untapped talent pool and other avenues for training, teaching and hiring individuals, creating a diverse and inclusive team," Nunan said. "CIC has truly changed how we lead."

Every step you take toward creating an inclusive workforce is a step toward a better future, a future

where everyone is valued, everyone is empowered, and everyone is given an equal opportunity to succeed and to be a part of the success of your organization.

So, take this step today, inspire others to follow, and join the many companies that value diversity and embrace the value of creating inclusive and equitable opportunities for people of all abilities in their workforce. ■

“Employees with disabilities have proven to be a motivated, dedicated and hard-working group of individuals who can positively impact the bottom line.”

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